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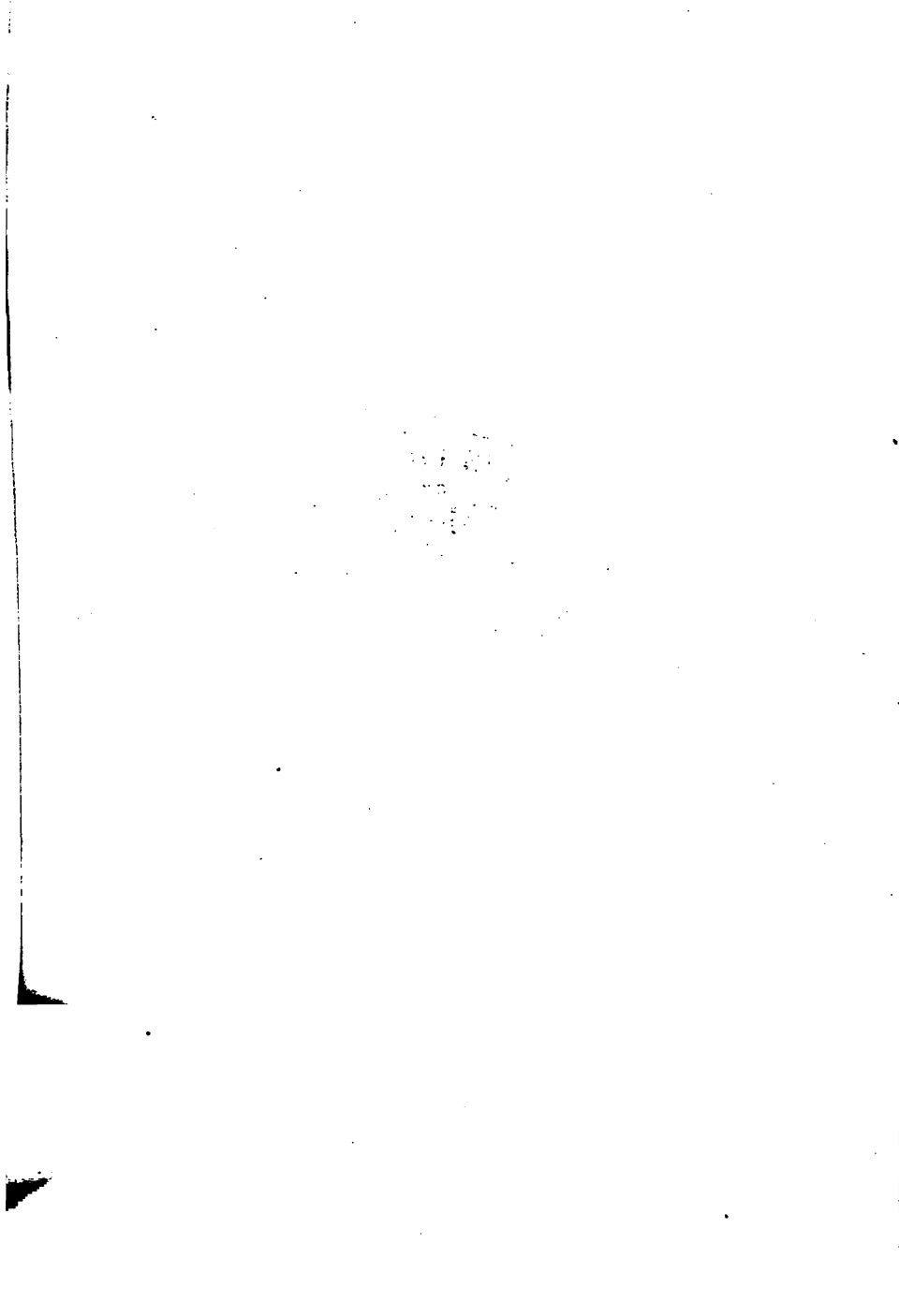
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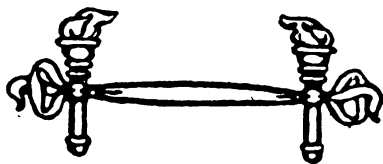
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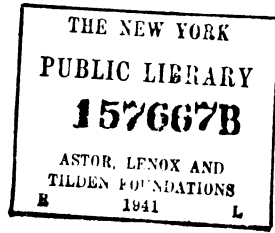
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MAUD H. YARDLEY



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The moving finger writes : and having writ,
Moves on : nor all your piety nor wit
Shall lure it back to cancel half a line ;
Nor all your tears wash out a word of it.

—OMAR KHAYYAM.

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I . . .

P OOR old Jack Drummond dead! By Jove! This is a bad business! Dead! And only : . . . "

The speaker paused, and, as he went on reading the newspaper, his wife looked up from her letters, and tried to see his face through the flowers which decorated the centre of the breakfast table.

"Somebody dead, did you say, dear? Somebody you know?"

"Yes; old Jack Drummond. Best chap that ever lived. Never was so surprised in my life! Why, not a fortnight ago I was at his studio, and he was as fit as his best friend could wish him . . . "

"Oh, you mean Mr Drummond the portrait painter? Fancy! Poor man! I'm sorry." The lady's tone did not express much sorrow. The dead artist was but a name to her; and just now she was worried over a dressmaker's bill, which she could see no way of paying.

Her husband swallowed his coffee rather hurriedly, and getting up from the table, went and stood by the fire, his coat-tails spread apart, and upon his nice face an expression of keen distress.

"It's no light matter for the child," he remarked,

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frowning slightly, as his wife went on opening her letters.

"There are—there is a family then?" she said absently.

"There's one child—a daughter. I daresay she's eighteen—perhaps a year or so more. Poor old Jack didn't leave a halfpenny, I'll be bound; and I don't suppose she's got the least idea of doing anything for herself."

"I daresay she has friends or people, or something," declared the lady comfortably and vaguely. "I thought portrait painting was quite profitable."

"It wasn't to Jack. Good Lord! he couldn't have kept a million if he had had it; and he never closed his hand to a friend—to a good many who'll forget old debts now, and him too, before a month is over. Oh, I suppose he made plenty of money, one way and another, but he spent it a deal faster than he made it. You met him, Carry"—with a faint touch of impatience. The man was speaking of a great favourite, and it irritated him to see how little interest his wife took in the information he was giving her.

"Yes, dear, I remember. He was a very handsome man, with merry eyes, and a good-natured face."

"He was one of the best. I don't know when anybody's death has come as such a shock. I think," deserting the fire, "I'll be off now, and see if there is anything I can do for the poor child. You—you wouldn't care to ask her here for a bit, would you, Carry?" he added hesitatingly, and not very hopefully.

His wife put away the objectionable bill with a sigh.

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"I don't think I should. Please don't think me unkind; but I find our own girls as much as I can manage, dear; and—and—well, she's got someone, surely."

"As far as I know, she's got a couple of aunts—sisters of her father. How their mother and poor Jack's can have been the same woman has always been a puzzle to me. Mind you, I know very little of them; but what I do know inclines me to think that their niece would not have much of a time with them. Prim, hard, narrow-minded old maids, who——"

"Who would be, perhaps, the very best companions for your friend's daughter. The life of absolute freedom she must have led—from all you have told me of her father—is certainly not good for any young girl. It's one of the reasons for my not—not—wanting to ask her here."

"Is it?" retorted her husband, hotly. He was going to say something more, but checked himself, and marched out of the room, banging the door behind him.

It was striking eleven when he hailed a hansom, and gave the driver an address in Chelsea; it was fully twenty minutes past the hour when he mounted the steps of a house facing the Embankment, close to Oakley Street—a house before the windows of which every blind was still drawn.

The servant who admitted him knew him well.

"I've only just heard, Marshall," said the visitor. "It was a terrible surprise. How is Miss Valerie taking it?"

"Pretty fairly, sir. It was nearly two weeks ago, you know, sir; and at first I thought her likely to go mad with grief. But she pulled round, like her own brave self, sir; and—and—there's been so

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much to do, and things in that muddle, sir, that there's been hardly time for thought."

"I understand. Ask your mistress to see me now, Marshall. I'll have a talk with you later on."

"Thank you, sir. Will you step this way, please?"

The man mounted the stairs, and the visitor followed. Presently he found himself in the old familiar studio, with his dead friend's daughter coming to meet him; and save that the drawn blinds shut out the winter sun, that the girl seemed to be weighed down by her sombre garments, there was little change. Jack Drummond's merry welcome might have rung out to him the next moment. But instead there was silence—the silence that comes alone with death.

"Mr Meredith," said the girl gladly. "I knew you would come."

"My dear, I have only just returned to town—only picked up the paper this morning, to find an allusion to—to—him, which told me the sad news. Of course I came at once; but I fear I am very late," glancing round the almost bare room. "Valerie, can you bear to tell me a little about it?" leading her to a chair, and taking a seat himself on the edge of a table near.

"There seems so little, and yet so much to tell," she returned, slowly.

The tears were thick in her eyes, but they did not fall; her lips trembled piteously, and her face looked very white against the black neck-band of her gown. But her voice was steady.

"It was all very sudden—terribly, cruelly sudden. He was taken ill, without a word of warning; it was in the night, and he hesitated to send for me—to disturb me. But he roused Marshall,

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and he came to me. Father died just as I got to his room. The doctor called it heart failure, and he said that he must have been ailing for some time—secretly. Oh, does it seem possible to you that he will never again sit in this room!”

Meredith blew his nose violently before he answered.

“It has completely knocked me over,” he admitted.

“Do you mind telling me, my dear, how—how—matters stand? I mean if you are at all provided for.”

“No, there was nothing left, Mr Meredith. Mr Grattan, the solicitor, you know, had charge of everything. You know, of course—I suppose you always knew?”

“Knew what?” inquired Meredith, uneasily.

“That father had been—oh, for years and years—living up to double, treble his earnings. Everything had to go to his creditors, Mr Grattan said. I was under the impression that he had a private income, if only a small one; but—but—he has left simply nothing. You are not blaming him?” looking up quickly. “You are not thinking that I grieve over that for myself?”

“No—no! I was thinking that surely Grattan might have done a little better for you—but perhaps I wrong him—and I was wishing that I had known before everything was settled. I’m not surprised. Poor old Jack was altogether too open-handed to leave much; but I’m very certain that he would have taken care to do something for you had he dreamed of so early an end to his life. Forgive me for speaking so plainly. You are leaving here?”

“Yes; at the end of the week,” a little hurriedly.

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"Will you tell me, in the circumstances, what you are likely to do?"

The colour spread quickly over the girl's face, and faded away almost as quickly; and her eyes were lowered, her fingers a little restless.

"I—I—have enough for a little while. I suppose," with a queer little smile, "I shall have to get something to do, though I don't know what. I have a perfect eye for colour, I believe;" glancing sadly at the corner of the room, now deserted, where Jack Drummond had loved best to work. "I can sing a bit and play a bit; and I can devil kidneys, and do *œuf à la cocotte* with any cook in London—but I am not sure that those are exactly helpful accomplishments."

She was laughing softly, not gaily, but in the half cynical, half quaintly humorous manner which reminded her visitor forcibly of the dead man, which brought to memory that man's palmy days, and the days—many more of these—when times were hard and funds at the lowest point; when he had shared and made merry over a crust, when he had been able to see the funny side of even his lamentable poverty. Those were days of long ago, of which Valerie could have but vague remembrance. The last few years had been years of ease and of luxury. She was talking about "getting something to do" carelessly, as though it were the simplest matter in the world; and she was making light of the fact that she knew nothing about work of any sort, as though the few paltry pounds she might have in hand would last for ever. It could not be that she was ignorant, either, of the value of money, or of the difficulty in obtaining employment. She had seen enough of the struggles

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of those whom her father had often assisted—men and women, young and middle-aged; artists, musicians, actors, girls as young as herself, who had had to struggle for a living all their lives—to make her wise. She had lived from her babyhood in the very cream of Bohemia; she had seen many phases of life; she must know her world a great deal better than most women of her age; and she must know that for a woman alone, in such a position as she now found herself, the way would be difficult in the extreme. It could not be that she was unaware of her own great beauty. Meredith knew well that there had been many here, in this very room, who would have told her of that, even if she could not have seen it for herself, many who would have taught her that it was a priceless possession. For himself, he had known her so long that in his eyes she had ever been the child that he had first seen queening it over Drummond's studio, petted and spoiled by everyone who went there—the child that had cost the mother her life, that for a time left the man's heart desolate. But all too suddenly to-day, it dawned upon him that she was no longer a child—she was a woman, and perhaps the loveliest he had ever seen. He had generally found her skipping about the house in very short skirts and a light blue overall; with her hair hanging loose about her shoulders, her sweet voice lifted high in some merry chansonette which the students had taught her; and he had forgotten, as Jack Drummond forgot, that the years were passing, and that the child had become a woman. Meredith remembered now, with a slight shock. He realised that she was alone and unprotected, and he grew vaguely fearful. He wished he had some woman friend whom he could

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send to her; he felt that the very least he could do for his old friend's daughter would be to take her to his own home. But he remembered, too, his wife's words spoken only this morning, and a slight flush, born partly of annoyance, went over his kindly face. He was glad that the lowered blinds darkened the room, he was glad that someone had even pulled across the ceiling the strip of green that covered the skylight; and he was still more glad that the girl was evidently unconscious of his embarrassment.

"There—there are your aunts—your father's sisters," he suggested, not very hopefully; and he saw that the colour deepened again in her cheeks.

"I know," she returned, getting up and taking a few turns up and down the long room. "They have written to me. Mr Grattan must have told them, because I did not remember even where they lived."

"And they have asked you to go to them? I am glad of that. It is quite the best thing that even I can think of at the moment. After a little while I must talk it over with some of the old friends, and see what can be done."

She thanked him with a little grateful smile, but it struck him that she seemed curiously uninterested in her future. She was nervously moving the fringe of a rug with her foot, and she was silent.

"You must not let anything your father may have said prejudice you against them, you know. They are most admirable ladies, I know; but of course their lives are a bit narrow, and they could never quite understand poor old Jack's mode of life."

"No," she said. Then suddenly she looked up at him.

"Dear Mr Meredith, you are more than good—I know you are sorry for and anxious about me; but

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don't be. I—I—shall let you hear of me soon—and what I am doing; and thank you more than I can say for coming."

Sweetly, gratefully as the words were spoken, Meredith could not help taking them as a dismissal. He found himself bending over her hands, assuring her that his friendship would be hers always, and begging her not to hesitate to write to him if at any time he could help her.

Then he was gone, forgetting even the little talk he had promised himself with Marshall, the old servant.

And once out in the street, he brought his brows together in a frown, and gave vent to a prolonged, soft whistle.

"I haven't seen her for a month or two, and I'll be hanged if I'd have known her in the street. I expected to find a helpless child ready to be led by the hand, and I find a self-possessed woman who receives me like a young duchess, who's practically alone in the world, homeless and penniless, and who can afford to look out at the future with a laugh! It isn't possible that she's got anything up her sleeve; it isn't possible that——" But he refused to frame even the thought, and turned sharply on his heel, ashamed of it.

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II

IT was bitterly cold, even for January; a high wind swept round the houses, and lashed the river from its sullen, brown quiet to angry restlessness. The snow fell heavily at intervals; the lights twinkled but dimly on the Embankment.

Valerie Drummond watched them listlessly while she stood at the open hall door, listening to Marshall whistling repeatedly and ineffectually for a cab. She had waited in the dreary dining-room, and the still more dreary drawing-room, in the hall, and on the stairs; and now she went out on to the steps, glad to leave the gloomy house at the back of her, thinking the moaning wind, and the great snow-flakes, and the cold, dark river, more cheerful to look upon than the deserted rooms, that were already stripped of most of their belongings, feeling less the chill of the keen winter air than the chill of death, that seemed to hang over every corner of the house.

There was restlessness, anxiety upon her, wholly new. There was an expression of mingled half fear and desperation in her eyes, that had lost all their merriment; there was a ring of impatience, of even irritability, in her low, pretty voice, that not one of her servants had ever heard before, that made Marshall look up at her sharply from his position on the lowest step, as she spoke now.

"What is the use of waiting there? Why don't you go down to the stand? You might whistle for

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an hour and not be heard in this gale!" Her words scarcely reached him, but the sharpness of the tone penetrated even the howl of the wind. And at that moment a hansom drew up at the kerb, the horse plunging beneath a swift stroke from the whip, the lights behind half-red lamps shining cheerily out of the gloom.

"Can't hear nothing, lady, but 'appened to see you," cabby volunteered, while Valerie settled herself, and Marshall closed the doors, and waited for directions, which his mistress seemed to have entirely forgotten.

"Shall I tell him where to, Miss?"

"Oh, yes; Eaton Square." It was not a very clear direction, but the horse was whisked smartly about, the unnecessary whip came down again, and Marshall was left on the pavement staring at nothing, a little wonderingly.

When she was well away from her own door, Miss Drummond put up the trap. "Go to Knightsbridge," she said. "I will tell you when I want to stop; and please leave off whipping that horse."

"Very good, lady." And cabby dropped the trap, put the whip in the socket, and let a grin widen his mouth.

"Her best boy's put her out!" he remarked to himself, and took to a narrow street which led to a short cut to Knightsbridge.

Arrived there, he was brought to a sudden halt by the re-opening of the trap. The girl was already on the step, and when she had paid him double his fare, he watched her gather her skirts more closely about her, and disappear into the darkness. She went on her way with certain steps, as over very familiar ground; no one heeded her, and she heeded none. The traffic

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was pressing, but she threaded her way through it with ease and a touch of recklessness. Presently she passed under a narrow archway, into a courtyard, where the lights burned so dimly that it was almost in darkness; but her step was as sure here as it had been in the street, and she turned swiftly through one of the three doors which stood open on the right. Beyond, a porter threw open glass doors to her; he would have escorted her to the lift, but she shook her head, and ran lightly up the stairs. At the top of the first landing she paused, pressed her finger upon an electric bell, and, a moment later, passed into a warm, brilliantly lighted, luxuriously furnished hall.

"Mr Brabazon is at home," she said, with more of assertion than question in her tone.

The man, who had been somewhat taken by surprise at her quiet, determined entrance, closed the door softly.

"Mr Brabazon is at home, madam ; but——"

"Tell him, please." He did not ask her name. Perhaps he knew instinctively that she would not tell him; and he remembered that if she did, he would have to carry it into the dining-room, where his master was entertaining half a dozen men at dinner. He knew his business, and that master's ways, a great deal too well for such a false step.

He ushered her into a small room, moved a big chair a little nearer to the fire, and then left her, letting fall the curtains over the door, which he closed.

In the dining-room he went silently over to his master's chair, and, standing well behind it, whispered a few words very softly, and with a low bow, in his ear.

Cuthbert Brabazon turned round with a start ; he

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leant back and asked some question, which the servant evidently answered satisfactorily. Then he muttered something which sounded like "The devil!" and five minutes later begged his friends to excuse him.

When he reached the room where Valerie Drummond was waiting for him, he found her walking about rather impatiently.

"My dearest little girl," he said, drawing her near to him by both her hands, "this is a surprise indeed. But why didn't you wire or telephone? I might not have been here; and, as it is, there are some men dining with me . . . but there, at the sight of you I forget everything! What a delicious morsel of loveliness it is!" he added softly, unfastening her furs with practised fingers, and removing her hat as neatly as she could have removed it herself. He tossed it on to a chair, and the furs after it; and then, with a sigh of momentary, keen satisfaction, took her into his arms.

"I'm famished for a kiss—it's six weeks since I've had one—since I've even seen you," he declared, bending his face down till there was not an inch between it and hers, and letting his eyes, that held a light of weariness always, wander over the exquisite beauty of her face, while, with their glance meeting hers, he called to life the sweet rose-colour in her cheeks. She rested against him with a sense of half fear, half content, but she put up her hand between his lips and hers.

"What is that for?" he asked, vexedly. "Oh, I suppose I know! But you are not going to be foolish about a few unanswered letters, Val? You know that if I did not write it was because writing was an impossibility; you know always, that if you

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don't hear, if you don't see me, that there are—that I can satisfy you there are good reasons. I haven't touched town till this very afternoon."

"Have you not read the papers? Have you heard nothing while you were away?" she asked, and in her voice there was already, before he answered, a sound of polite disbelief.

He released her from his hold; his face took on that wearied expression which had struck a chill of dread to many a heart far older, far wiser than hers, and he threw himself down on the arm of a chair, with a sigh that was half hopeless, wholly disappointed.

She might have been a child whom he meant to leave to get over a fit of temper before he spoke again; and while he kept silence, he looked towards the door, as though to remind her that there were guests in another room awaiting his return.

"If you have not read—if you have heard nothing," she said, "then forgive me—I wronged you! You do not know . . ." A choking lump rose in her throat, stifling the words; and her eyes went from his to the long folds of black, fine cloth which clung softly to her graceful form. In one moment the truth seemed to flash upon him, in one moment a thousand thoughts—mostly uncomfortable ones—seemed to whirl themselves through his mind. He understood the meaning of her visit, and with the understanding there came a sense of undefined half resentment.

"You mean!" he exclaimed, springing to his feet. "Vall you can't mean that . . ."

"I mean that he is dead—father! He died suddenly, a fortnight ago. I thought it could not be possible that you had not heard; and oh, your silence nearly broke my heart."

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"Good heavens! Poor little girl! What a brute you must have been thinking me! I swear to you I never heard a word about it. That is why," with faint uneasiness that she was quick to detect, "you—you—came here to-night?" His face had gone very white, his eyes, usually so tired, lost their languor; they travelled restlessly over her sombre gown, from the edge of black fox fur at her feet to the bit of transparent, filmy lace stretched across her chest, in a half bewildered way. Then they went to her face, to the softly rounded chin, to the milky whiteness of her cheeks, to the curves of her rich lips, to the little straight nose and the heavily fringed eyes, puzzling in colour, and for that reason doubly attractive, half shy, and even when they were merry, looking at one as though always through a tear. And because he never attempted to resist beauty, and hers had appealed to him as the beauty of woman had never appealed to him yet, he held her close to him once more, and took the kiss which, just now, she had refused him.

"You can understand my anxiety," she said swiftly, trying to read his eyes. "You can realise what it was to me when there was no word from you—no sign; when you never came——"

"But, my dear——"

"I know now—I understand—at least I try to; and I could not know the reason for your silence; I—there was none to tell me—none I could ask."

Brabazon breathed a slight sigh of relief and gratitude.

"And you came here to-night," he repeated, with that new anxiety in his voice, as though he feared to hear her reason, and yet could not rest till it came to him from her own lips.

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"Because I could endure the suspense no longer! Because the days and the nights were torture—torture of wonder and misery and doubt that I would not harbour. Because I had lost all, and there was only you left. Is it so wonderful? Is it so surprising? Is it not—not—natural that I should have come to you—to you," colouring faintly, "to whom alone I have the right to come?"

His hold upon her grew loose. He drew forward a chair and put her gently into it, and stood with his arm on the edge of the mantelpiece and his eyes on the hearthrug.

"It isn't surprising or wonderful," he admitted, uneasily. "Only it—it—happens to be deuced awkward at this moment——"

"You mean my being here—because of—of—those men in the other room?"

"No; they don't count—they won't be the wiser. I meant that it is rough on you—left quite alone—and—and—when—I——"

"Alone!" She seemed to catch at the word and hold it, remembering only its meaning for her. "Why do you say that to me? I shall never cease to miss father, but I can never be quite alone while I have you."

Brabazon was trying to dig lumps of fur out of the rug with his heel; he seemed to have some difficulty in framing his next words. They came with a rush at last.

"And I'm a prize, little girl, that I am afraid circumstances will forbid you laying claim to," he said. The slight laugh which accompanied the words was forced, it rung very false; but it was only when, at last, his eyes met hers that something of the meaning of it came to her. She got up from

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her chair swiftly; her limbs trembled beneath her, a shudder as of cold passed over her body.

"Look here, Val," he said hastily, "you mustn't take it badly; you must try, for both our sakes, to be reasonable, sensible. There is something I ought to have told you long ago, but it would not come easily. It might have put an end to many happy hours for you and me. Frankly, I had not the courage—I dared not risk losing you . . ."

"Don't say it!" she interrupted, a little wildly, putting up her hands and shrinking as if from a blow, "Do not say it! I know what it is—I can tell you! You—you—don't care any more—you—oh, my God!" as he still kept his position by the mantel-piece, as he was silent instead of contradicting her. "And I—I—came here to you . . ."

"You don't give me a chance to explain—you jump to the conclusion, woman-like, that I have ceased to care, that I have tired of you, before I say a word. You are utterly and entirely wrong."

At his words the horror died out of her eyes; she went nearer to him, and clasped her hands on his arm. And while he smoothed them lightly, he repeated—"You are utterly and entirely wrong, Val. I have loved you more than I have ever loved any woman in my life—more, very likely, than I shall ever love another. We've been very happy, Val—I wish," restlessly, "I had told you the truth before, or that, at any rate, I had not been obliged—it need not have come out at the moment when you were full of grief for—his loss . . . too." The "too" was characteristic of the speaker; and it was the one word that the woman heard distinctly. It seemed to be hurled at her, to prepare her for anything. The little chill feeling came back to her heart; and her

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hands, that had been clasped tightly on his arm, fell limply to her sides.

"Go on," she said. "Tell me the truth now—tell me what your words mean."

"That if—if—things were different I could do as I pleased; but I am not my own master—I cannot——"

"It was for that reason," she interrupted very slowly, very quietly, while her eyes never left his face, and the colour seemed as though it would never return to hers, "that you bade me keep our—friendship a secret, that you said—our marriage—when the time came—would have to be a secret too."

"I am afraid I drew a little on my imagination, Val. The fact is—er—you were a tremendously proud little girl in—in—many ways; and if I had not led you to believe that marriage was to be the—er—ultimate result of our—our intimacy, why, you'd have given me the cold shoulder in no time! It's no use beating about the bush now," he went on, with a touch of desperation in his voice, but never once daring to meet the eyes that he could feel were fixed upon him. "It's no use my pretending to talk to you as though you were a little innocent bread and butter miss, just out of school. We've been more than a good deal in each others' lives in this past year, Val; we've been all that a man and a woman who love can be to each other. And if—I—I—chose to play a slight part, by way of putting matters on a more—on a straighter footing—if I sought to ease your conscience by inventing adamantine, property-holding relatives, who would take a deal of propitiating, I never honestly supposed—I don't suppose now—that you seriously believed in it. Oh, hang it," he added, with the old bored look coming into his

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eyes. "You make it infernally hard to say! You stand there and make a fellow feel that you are landing him at the North Pole with your eyes . . . I have been—I am—awfully fond of you! You must let me do all I can—I'll do every mortal thing I can for you; but—but the news of your father's death has—well, it has altered things in an amazing way. It has brought you here to me—very naturally—it has suggested to you the moment for the fulfilment of a promise which, as I say," with another forced laugh, "we both played with, with which we both excused . . ."

She silenced him with a gesture, too peremptory to disobey. "And I came to you here—I came to you—believing in you!" She was rather moaning again, softly, than saying across his hurried words, that he was trying to make sound easy. "I came to you—my God! sure of your love, certain of your welcome, confident of your care!"

The blood burned hot in her face now; it was her eyes which were lowered, not his. The fact encouraged Brabazon to continue with his rapid speech, that held a half explanatory, half persuasive tone.

"Be reasonable, Val! Why make such a tragedy out of really very little? I'd reckoned on things going on much as they were for a good while to come (you'll admit that I couldn't be prepared for the death that means such a loss to you); and, upon my soul, I don't see why everything should not be all right, why you should not be absolutely happy with me now, if you'd only be a reasonable little girl, and if you would not kick at being kept in the back-ground for a time."

She was so silent, so still—there was no sign even that she breathed, but the slight stirring of the laces

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at her breast—that Brabazon looked up sharply. He caught the full glance of her eyes, and at something in them his face took on a tinge of shamed, dusky red.

“Need you say any more?” Valerie asked in a voice from which all the life had gone, and in which only a chill remained. “Must you make matters worse? Can’t you let me go without making me despise myself—more? I understand everything you have said, and all you have left unsaid!” She was putting on her hat while she spoke; as she took up her furs, Brabazon instinctively placed them on her shoulders, without really knowing what he was doing. He knew that she was going, and he could not frame any words to detain her—he was not altogether sure that he really wished to detain her. “Will you please remember that I blame myself so much that I can only blame you very little. I suppose I may rely upon you to forget that I—I—ever entered these doors—that we ever met?”

She spoke like one repeating a lesson; she walked like a woman in her sleep. She pulled aside the portière. The action roused Brabazon, and he stretched out a quick hand and drew her back.

“Don’t be a little fool, Vall!” he said, the momentary, rare shame that had overwhelmed him fading away, and a certain anger taking its place. “You think you understand all I have left unsaid, but you do not. I’d like to have avoided saying it, but you make me. You think that I’m—I’m backing out of our marriage, now that your father is dead, and because I’m tired of you. And you’re utterly wrong! You must have known a little how the land lay, all along, say what you will. You must have seen that

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I played my part, and let you play one, simply that you might fancy your conscience more clear. Young as you are—with the absolute freedom that has marked your whole life, you have seen twice as much of the world as nine out of ten of any other women of your years; and you must have let me lead you with your eyes wide open. If you only take the goods the gods provide, like a sensible little woman, you'd have a much better time of it in the long run. I'll tell you one thing," keeping his hand firmly on her arm, and speaking confidentially and a little wearily, "and it's more than I could say to any other woman alive!—I'd marry you to-morrow, like a shot, if I did not think marriage the most rotten institution ever invented, and if I were free to do as I chose. But—you may as well hear it now as at any other time—the question of marriage was settled for me long ago—long before I met you, in fact seven years before that. My dear little girl," releasing her arm, and stretching both his own above his head with a movement of utter boredom, "if you had not been the most charming of wild flowers, in a world not mine, I should never have looked at you—and you would have heard long ago that I've got a wife already—a pattern of all the virtues," with a sneering laugh, "a most amiable young party, who loves me about as much as I love her, but who is good enough to keep out of my way all she can! There, that is the truth—which you insisted upon hearing! Nothing very tragic or uncommon, is it? And if I'd told you before, we shouldn't have had this year of . . ."

A little stifled cry checked his speech. The woman's hands had gone out before her as though to implore silence; she leant heavily against the back of a chair, striving to gather strength before she tried

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to walk to the curtains, upon which her eyes were fixed.

At that moment, from the dining-room, there came an uproarious burst of laughter.

"I'd forgotten them," declared Brabazon, with uneasy eyes turning towards the door. "They were pretty far gone when I left them, and they're capable of hunting us out! Listen, Val—I'll drop you a line to-night, when they are gone—I'll come over in the morning—or I'll——"

Another shout of laughter, Brabazon's name called loudly from a very little distance, roused Valerie from a sort of stupor, from sudden numbness which she had been trying to shake off. She did not speak a word. He was doubtful if she had even heard what he said. She groped her way through the portière which he held back; dimly she saw the servant waiting in the hall, and that, at a sign from Brabazon, he held the door wide open, quickly. Then there was another burst of laughter, the same voice calling—

"Brabazon! Where are you? What the devil are you doing all this time? I'm coming to look for you!" And then, close to her horrified ear—

"Oh! My aunt! A PETTICOAT!"

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III

HOW she reached the street Valerie Drummond never quite knew. As she crossed the road, one motor had to swerve out of her way so sharply that it almost struck the side of an omnibus; and a cab driver pulled his horse on to its haunches with a savage and outspoken oath; and in the centre of the road a policeman took her by the arm, with a half suspicious look in his eyes.

"Was you tryin' to get run over, lady?" he inquired, searching her little livid face curiously.

"Thank you," returned Valerie, vaguely. "Will you call me a cab, please?"

There was a moment's wait, and then she was giving the address, which the policeman repeated, thanking him again, and being driven towards her own home.

Arrived there, she mounted the steps a little unsteadily. But the chill gloominess of the half lighted hall did not strike her, as it had struck her when she came out: what was the misery of a half empty house beside the misery of her entirely empty life, that all at once had grown so useless to her? She had felt loneliness, but loneliness tempered by the certainty of comfort not far off; now there was a sense of utter desolation upon her.

"I sent some supper to your room, Miss," Marshall said, looking a little anxiously into her face.

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"Thank you. Tell Catherine I shall not want her, please. Good-night." She went very slowly up the stairs; she had passed the room where her father died, with a shudder, ever since she had seen him taken from it,—now she put her hands before her eyes and hurried by. A large fire burned in her bedroom, her slippers were by the fender, and a loose wrapper hung over the back of a chair. There was every sign of comfort, but Valerie did not notice. She only knew that the blinds were closely drawn that no eye could see her; and was grateful accordingly. Mechanically she went about undressing, as mechanically she put her bare feet into the warmed slippers, and threw the loose gown round her. Then she sat down by the glowing fire, and stared into its heart. By degrees the warmth comforted her a little; her chilled, trembling hands lay still, her mind became more clear. She was able to go over the events of the day. She remembered Meredith's visit, his kindness, his desire to help her; and, with a throb of passionate gladness, she remembered, too, that she had refrained from saying to him words that were on the tip of her tongue, refrained from telling him that he need have no anxiety about her future, from letting him know that she had no fear for it. Because he was so genuinely sorry for her, the temptation had assailed her to partially confide in him; but she had put it aside—she had feared question. Now, she thanked heaven in her soul for that fear, anything, that had held her silent. She went over every little trivial thing she had done through the day, over her secret anxiety, over her weary waiting for the appearance of Marshall with a letter, a telegram, which would bear Brabazon's name; for the sound of the telephone bell, and, after it, Brabazon's voice from

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afar off. She went over all the worry, all the fear, all the haunting doubt of the last fortnight, the anxiety and the intolerable suspense which had led up to her going to Brabazon's rooms to-night. A great scorching wave of crimson spread over her face and lingered there for a long minute. Even though she was quite alone, she shut her eyes and put her hands over her ears, as though to shut out the sight of his face, to deaden the sound of his voice, half passionate, half angry, wholly full of a nameless power over her. She went over the past year, then; and with memory, she went hot and cold by turns. Every drop of blood seemed to ebb slowly from her heart, and to leave her with a feeling of sick faintness that partly robbed her of her senses. Anger, regret, self-contempt, were all swallowed up in unbounded humiliation, in an agony of shame from which, she thought, at this moment, she could never recover, through all of which she realised that the most poignant grief was hers this night. A sort of soul panic took possession of her.

What a fool—what a senseless, confiding fool she had been! It was all her fault—all! In all the world, was there a woman who had been offered deadlier insult, who had been more cruelly deceived and humiliated? The thought stung her to life. With a movement of fierce anger, she sprang to her feet, and pushing first one chair and then another out of her way, fell to pacing the room with rapid steps. The lace of her gown caught in the handles of the toilet-table drawers, and she tore it away with violence that worked its utter destruction; her eyes fell upon the daintily spread tray, and she thrust it from her with a movement of disgust.

There was no present — there was no future! There was only the hideous past, that had begun a

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year ago, and that had ended to-night—not an hour ago!

She walked from one side of the room to the other till her limbs shook with weariness, till the clock struck out the small hours of a new morning, till the fire died away from glowing red to dull, dead grey. From every corner she seemed to see mocking faces, to hear mocking voices. For a little while her mind seemed to be a blank; and when it was not blank it was a blind tangle. By and by she heard signs of life about the house, and knew that another day had well begun. From outside there came to her the clatter of early milk carts, the footsteps of people on their way to the day's work. From inside there was the rattle of a pail, the swish of a broom. They reminded her that life was going on just the same, that the world had not stood still because she had been humbled in the dust. Life was going on just the same—her life; she could not die at will. She would have to go on with it, too. She would live—it might be for another fifty years; she was only twenty now! She must live! And with that thought—a thought that became a disagreeable certainty—there came another. How? Where? And there came, also, the full realisation of how utterly alone she was. She had said to Brabazon that she had lost father, home, all; and now she had lost the man upon whose love she had counted, upon whose honour she had placed all her faith and trust. She had indeed lost all—even her self-respect. She could see afresh the uneasiness of his manner, she could hear again the ring of her own despairing voice, she could hear the petulance, mingled with the weariness and incredulity of his. She could hear him telling her not to be a little fool; and felt herself go hot all over at the

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memory of his suggestion that he wished everything to be just as it had been, at the memory that he had evidently no doubt but that she would wish it too. She recollected how she had heard, and had been almost powerless to answer him; she knew now what he had been thinking of her all this past year; and over all, she could hear the bursts of laughter from his dining-room, she could see him with his arms stretched above his head in utter boredom, while he told her calmly, carelessly, that he had a wife already, a wife who had been his for upwards of seven years—who was an “amiable young party, who was good enough to keep out of his way all she could.”

Then something seemed to snap in her brain; the terrible strain gave way; merciful, healing tears came, and the woman threw herself down by the side of her bed, and burst into passionate, hopeless, agonised weeping, that robbed her of her little remaining strength, and left her weak and weary as a child after a long spell of grief.

Long after, when daylight forced itself through a chink in the blind, when her eyelids, heavy and drooping, refused to open, she dragged herself to her feet and crept beneath the coverlet.

Dimly she heard a servant coming towards her room, dimly she realised that she was losing consciousness, dimly she understood that blessed sleep had come at last. And as her face touched the cool linen, she dreamed that she was back in Brabazon's rooms, and above his voice there rose another, jovial, a little thick, full of intense amusement and curiosity—

“Oh! My aunt! A PETTICOAT!”

Marshall's wife, Catherine, crept about the room softly as a kitten. She shook her head at the

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untouched tray, and let her eyes wander to the wan little face on the pillow. It was a very wan face; the cheeks were drawn, the lips were compressed, even in sleep, and great purple shadows lay beneath the heavy dark fringe of eyelashes.

One arm hung helplessly over the side of the bed, and across the fore part of it a tangle of bright, copper-coloured, waving hair fell heavily.

"She have took on!" murmured the woman to herself, while she gently put back the arm, and spread the fine masses of hair over the pillow, with loving touch. "She's just wore out with grievin' and thinkin'; and no wonder!" The last remark was addressed to the offending, untouched tray.

Taking it downstairs, she set it down with a mild crash right under Marshall's nose.

"Look at that," she said, "not a bite in her lips all the blessed yesterday! She's lying in her bed like a little dead thing, so white—and her eyelids swole, and a sob catching of her breath like a child, every moment or two. Have she said anything to you where she's going or what she's meaning to do, Marshall?"

"Not a word. I thought maybe she would after Mr Meredith had been; but she did seem fairly on hot bricks all yesterday. He said he'd have a talk with me; but I never even see him go!" Catherine broke an egg into the poacher with a little vicious crack.

"There isn't a penny piece," she said, "Mr Grattan warned us of that. Miss Valerie's got to be out of this house in three days at latest, and what I want to know is—what is she going to do? Where's she going to? She knows no more about earning a living than this basin."

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"There was Mr Drummond's sisters, you know, Catherine."

"What! them old ladies at Dale? Lor' bless you! why, Miss Valerie wouldn't never stand them nor the place for a week!"

"Poor child!" murmured Marshall. "She'll find there's worse nor that to bear."

"But them! Why, they're the sort not even the master could abide to hear talked about."

"It'll be a home, anyway, and with her own flesh and blood. That's something."

Catherine said "Um" dubiously, and flourished a piece of toast about with some indignation.

"She as has had her own way from a baby," she went on, "and has run wild, and been petted and spoiled the way that would have ruined any other girl—it would kill her, Marshall."

"Well, don't you go telling her so. If she's got to go there, down to Dale, let her go with a light heart. I'd be easier than if she stayed on by herself in London. Just think what a beauty she's growed; just remember some of those as has been here and gone pretty well wild over her. You know there's all *them* left though her father *is* gone, and plenty of them a bit free living. She'd maybe get mixed up with a crowd as would do her no good. No, Catherine, she's young, when all's said and done; and it's my belief, she'd be better off with the old ladies."

"I suppose you're right," assented his wife, rather grudgingly. "Lor', don't it seem dreadful that anyone should die like the master did, and leave his child wanting for even a roof!"

Marshall did not answer. The subject was distressing to him to a degree. He brought a fresh

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serviette and spread it upon the tray; and he polished a knife with elaborate care, and passed the duster over his moist eyes, surreptitiously. The good old days of happiness in the service of those two whom he had loved well were over, and no one realised it more fully than Marshall.

Catherine was heavy-hearted too, though her very back seemed to bristle with indignation as she went out of the kitchen with her mistress's breakfast.

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IV

CATHERINE made such a clatter with the tray that the sleeper stirred uneasily, and the noise being followed up by a good deal of rustling about the room, Miss Drummond opened her eyes, coming back to life, and, very slowly, to memory, with an effort that was painful.

"Is it late, Catherine?" she asked.

"No, child—it's early enough. If you'll just eat this you may lie back and sleep all you like."

Valerie felt unequal to argument; she also felt weak with long fasting, and so she sat up on one elbow, and took the slight breakfast half unwillingly, half gratefully. By the time she lay back against the pillows once more, sleep was banished, and only clear memory remained. It held her silent; she lay quite still, her eyes following the servant without seeing her. She still felt that dull feeling of added loss, of dread, of bewilderment, of bitter humiliation and shame; but some of the miserable helplessness was gone. With the light of day, with the knowledge that the world was awake again, that there was life all about her, in which she must take part, there came to her almost all her old courage wherewith she had often helped her father, and sometimes, with him, fought Fate. It was courage which had in it a touch of reckless, careless daring—courage that she inherited from him. It was made up of patience, of extraordinary powers of

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endurance, of natural light-heartedness that no amount of adversity could destroy. Jack Drummond had been her comrade and friend as well as her father; he had taught her that there was nothing so bad but that there was room for it to be worse, and she had learned to believe it. He had brought her up in the comfortable certainty that something would be sure to "turn up"; and as she had had good reason to think that there was much truth in his prophecies, she had fallen into the habit of taking life happily on the fly, as he did, and generally coming out of difficult situations very little the worse.

Last night it had seemed to her that she had received her death-blow; this morning, though she looked back upon one hour of that night with shame that made her cheeks tingle warmly, now, the rare feeling of utter helplessness that had been hers then, was no longer present. The blood was so young in her veins; life should have but just begun for her, not, as it had seemed a few hours ago, ended. Last night she had wished to die; this morning, while she lay still, and let her eyes wander to the patch of blue in the winter sky that she could see through her window, she felt a shudder run through her at the fresh thought of death, a determination to cling to life with all her power. Beyond these four walls there was surely freedom and hope for her; of her misery and her humiliation none knew—none need ever know. Her father had taught her that it was only cowards who went under, easily, at the first blow; life had taught her that one must not endure the blows too calmly—one must hit back. Oddly enough, her mind went back to old happy days—made happy by her father, not those that had been filled with happiness by another. Days when they had

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made merry over a scanty meal, or a terribly empty pocket. She was vaguely glad that she could remember these things to-day. Laughter was far enough from her now, but a glance back into the past told her what her courage could be. It seemed to point out a road to her that she had almost forgotten.

She sprang out of bed so suddenly that Catherine was startled.

"Lor', my bird!" she exclaimed.

"I feel better now, Catherine, thanks to your breakfast," the girl declared. "I'll ring when I want you."

The woman went, a little reluctantly. The words she wanted to speak would not come. Catherine was not very brave except with Marshall.

Miss Drummond made her toilette very thoughtfully and very slowly. She had pushed aside a little heap of letters which she was sure would only tell her again so many things that she knew already; and she made a wry face at some bills, with which, she was glad to remember, Mr Grattan had told her she had no concern. Still thoughtfully, still making plans only to unmake them, she presently went downstairs. Half way, she was met by Marshall, who put all her plans to flight, and drove every vestige of colour from her cheeks, by the announcement that Mr Brabazon desired to see her.

"And I've showed him into the studio, Miss, which it doesn't look quite so forlorn and empty," he added, standing aside for her to pass.

Valerie did not answer; she could not. The little sickly feeling of faintness, that had almost overcome her last night, threatened her now. But Marshall only saw that she went in the direction of the studio, and entered it calmly.

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Brabazon turned sharply from the window at her unexpectedly prompt appearance. He held out his hand, which Miss Drummond chose not to see.

"I said I should look you up this morning, Val," he declared, letting the rejected hand fall to his side and his eyebrows go up resignedly, while he fixed his tired eyes on her face. "It was worth a dozen of writing—what?"

"You—there is something you wish to say to me?" inquired Valerie coldly. Her tone was a little perplexing.

"Of course there is! You know that well enough. There are any amount of things! Don't let us quarrel, sweetest—I hoped you would have slept off your anger! Last night—I—well, the fact is, I'd had the very mischief of a day; I don't believe I quite knew what I was saying or doing, and then those men were there, and—there was no time to come to any arrangement——"

"Arrangement?—What about?"

"Why, about you of course! And what is going to be done and where you are going."

"Is that any business of yours?"

"Whew! I should rather think it is! I like you in a temper," he added softly, and came nearer to her; "but let's get over business before you start bullying me, little girl. Then you may say what you like, and I will forgive you; you may cry your dear little heart out—in my arms, of course—and I'll kiss the tears away. Then we might motor down to Truwell—dine, and . . ."

A smothered sound, that was something between a moan of pain and a savage cry of rage, silenced him. Valerie had stepped back out of his reach, her eyes ablaze, her whole slender body quivering. The words

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she would have spoken seemed to be choked back in her throat; she hated herself because she had no power to speak, to order him from the room, to say all that was in her heart. She felt the tears of anger rising to her eyes and then falling miserably down her cheeks, and she turned blindly away, knowing that he mistook them for tears of grief, because he reached her side in one step, and took her forcibly in his arms, and kissed her throat and lips and hair and closed eyes at will, while she lay for the last time on his heart, while she fought with all her strength to crush out of her own heart the love that seemed to leap to life again beneath his touch.

"What a heart-broken little girl it is!" he whispered over her softly. "Don't cry so badly, darling. It is all my fault, I know, and I want you to forgive me. If I hadn't dined a good deal better than wisely, last night, I don't think I should have let you into family secrets. But as you know now, it is no use trying to keep them dark. Do you, or do you not understand my position?"

Then, at last, she found strength to free herself, to thrust him back from her so suddenly that his hold loosened upon her unconsciously, to move quickly to the other side of a broad table.

"Have you no mercy, no pity?" she breathed pantingly. "Have you not shamed me enough? Oh, my God! what have I ever done to deserve this; harm enough, I own, but not—not enough to warrant this insult. Why have you come here at all? Why do you seek me again? Did you not tell me last night that you have a wife? Can you not understand that you might far better have driven a knife into my heart."

"This is melodrama, my child."

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"It is truth! I believed in you, I trusted you, and you deceived me."

"You loved me, too; you love me now!"

She held her hand heavily over her heart for a moment, but though she neither admitted nor denied it, Brabazon was well satisfied.

"You deceived me," she went on, "that ends everything. Cannot you understand that the only thing I pray for now is that I may never look upon your face again, that I may have power to forget you utterly. Your place is not here—it is with your wife. Go to her, but never dare to seek me again. So far as I am concerned, I can only tell you what, in your heart, you must know, that you have filled all the years that may come for me with shame and everlasting regret—shame that I should have been weak enough to put myself in your power, regret that I could ever have cared sufficiently for you to—to—stoop to deception—to worse—for your sake. You know what I mean; you know that the only thing I ever hid from my father in all my life, was my—our friendship. I told you last night that I blamed myself so entirely that I could not blame you much. And you reminded me that I am no innocent school-girl. That would seem to rob me of all excuse for ever having trusted you; yet I have an excuse—I have been taught always to believe the simple word of a gentleman. I believed you loved me, and I knew I loved you—in that, all is told. I trusted you always—doubt was nowhere in my mind. You know that—you know," covering her face for a moment with both hands, "how well I trusted you. I believed that one day I should be your wife—was it so odd that to you first of all my thoughts should turn—I should turn? And when I could bear the

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suspense and the silence no longer, I came to you—to hear that you had a wife already—oh, to hear that for eight long years you have called this woman wife—to realise that while I gave you all my faith and trust, while I—I—O God! while I let you lead and I followed blindly, you, for your sport, were laying the foundation stone of the ruin of my whole life, you in your heart were mocking at my trust, as you have doubtless mocked at the trust of many another woman. And, more than that, I came to you to be offered the deepest insult of which you could possibly think—to hear that it is your belief that my eyes were open always to—to—my position.”

Her voice, always low and pretty, had scarcely risen by a tone; but it was so full of passion, of contempt for herself, and something more than contempt for him, of mingled weariness and anger, that, for a little while, he let her speak on, not attempting to interrupt her.

“What I do in the future is no concern of yours; whither I go, of my will, you shall never know; but be sure it is where all memory of the past may be shut out, and where you and I may never meet again. The blow you have dealt me has dug the grave of my love, though, in spite of that, it is hard, yet, to bury it, and I know that in time I shall be able to look back upon this year as upon one that was never a year in my life, that there will be no touch of grief in my heart for the loss of *you*, but only grief for my own pitiful weakness. I know that I shall laugh, when laughter may come to me again, at my own self-deception, which lasted long enough, alas! to make me your dupe. And yet,” with a little gesture of despair, “I could almost wish that it were not so, that I could keep the memory at least

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sacred—it would take away some of the disgust, some of the shame.”

Brabazon had listened carefully, and not very comfortably. For the first time in all his reckless, evil life there came upon him a touch of shame, a feeling of compassion for a woman whom he had deceived and betrayed. It might have been that, with her words still ringing in his ears, he realised how completely he had worked the ruin of her young life; it might have been that he realised that he was parting, perhaps, this once, from a woman of whom he had not yet tired, and whom he would not willingly let go without a struggle.

But the shame and the compassion died a swift death; he caught most clearly the tone of anger in her voice, and he decided that it was a good sign. The greater her anger—hers or any woman's—the more pleasant the task of comforting her; also the more easy. It only remained for the tears to come again—the woman who wept forgave soonest.

“I don't deny that from your point of view I deserve all you have just said to me, Val,” he said suddenly, letting his voice sink to soft persuasive gentleness, and his eyes speak swift, tender passion straight into hers. “The only excuse I have to offer is my love for you, and also my fear of losing you. I cannot give you my name; but I can give you love and happiness—I can give you all my care and the best of my life, such as it is. As for all the rubbish you'd have me believe about not caring for me, pooh! you're in a rage, little woman, and perhaps a trifle jealous—though I swear to you, you need not be—and you say things to-day that you will regret to-morrow. I know you better than you know yourself, Val,” reaching her side and putting a tender arm about

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her shoulders and holding her in a grip from which she knew she could only escape by a violent struggle. "You're absolutely alone, and for that matter so am I, in spite of ties which I do my best to forget; and who shall hinder us from finding our happiness in our own way? If you went on telling me for an hour that you hated me, I should not believe you. I should remind you, instead, of a day a year ago, when we first met, of another day, long after that; ah! and many other days that I defy you to forget, defy you to regret, when . . ."

"And so you are a coward, too!" she breathed, very low, but with her eyes ablaze, and every word coming in a gasp. Then, throwing herself back, she released her shoulders, and with a swift movement that he failed to arrest, put her hand heavily upon the bell.

Marshall must have been remarkably close at hand; before the sound died away he was in the room.

Miss Drummond turned to him quietly, but with a very white face.

"Open the door for Mr Brabazon," she said.

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V

VALERIE stood with her hand closed tightly upon the window curtain; she heard the door below shut; Brabazon's step upon the pavement outside; and she leant forward in time to see his tall figure passing leisurely round the corner of the street.

That chapter of her life was ended; that page folded down! The chill brilliance of the winter morning faded before her eyes; everywhere misery and hopelessness stared her in the face—the only restful spot in all the world was the cold, restless river opposite, and to that her eyes turned with unconscious longing.

A short, respectful cough, meant to attract her attention, roused her. Marshall was standing at her elbow with a letter upon a tray.

"It came by special messenger, Miss."

Valerie recognised the writing. It was that which always appeared on the envelope of a letter from Mr Grattan, the gentleman whom she had been wont to style "our confidential, family solicitor." She made a wry face at it; there was not likely to be much inside to interest her. And when Marshall had gone, she opened it with indifferent fingers, but fingers that still trembled.

Mr Grattan informed her that all which could possibly be done for her had been done; that the

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little which had been saved out of her father's possessions had been already handed over to her; and that there was nothing further he, himself, could do, gladly as he would have helped her. Then he went on to say that he had received a visit from her aunts, the Misses Drummond of Dale, who desired it to be made known to their niece, through him, that they were willing for her to make their home her own till she had succeeded in getting employment, which employment they were prepared to help her to find. He expatiated rather tactlessly upon their generosity, and advised their niece most strongly to accept their offer of a home. He hinted that this would undoubtedly mean a start in life for her, and reminded her that she was certainly not in a position to refuse such an offer lightly. And for a long time Valerie studied the letter carefully. She had forgotten her aunts—the slight mention that had been made of them by Mr Grattan at the time of her father's death. They were women whom she had never seen, so far as she could remember; women of whom her father had never spoken to her. Beyond knowing that he had two sisters, she knew nothing about them. In the early days of her childhood she had formed the idea that he and they were not friends; latterly, up to the time of her father's death, she had completely forgotten their very existence. But now she remembered them; now she remembered that if she chose, she might, through them, escape from her own little world, almost from memory, and she might certainly put the past quite behind her. There was temptation in their offer which could not have existed in it had it been made a day sooner—made seriously. She had heard, with indifferent ears, that they had asked

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her to go to them, from Mr Grattan, before; she remembered now that even her father's friend, Mr Meredith, had advised it, and had seemed glad that these ladies had written to her. But she had paid so little heed. If she noticed their invitation at all, it was to regard it in the light of many little sympathetic, meaningless compliments she had received in the first moments of her grief. She remembered now, that they had written to her and evidently to Mr Grattan, and it came to her in a vague sort of way that they would not be likely to pay anybody a sympathetic, meaningless compliment. There was certainly temptation in their offer—in Mr Grattan's dull, chill, pedantic letter. Unconsciously he had shown her a way out of her world; he used the words "a start in life," and she read in them a meaning which he had not intended. She wanted to start afresh; and these unknown women, her aunts, gave her the opportunity at the very moment when she was eager to grasp it. She remembered that one of her father's favourite sayings was that no door ever shut but that another flew open. It had seemed to her that the gates of a paradise of her own making had been slammed in her face; it seemed to her now that the door to hope, to a new life, a new world, had been opened to her. The past should be shut away behind; only the present should live in her mind.

She rang the bell again.

"Marshall," she said, "my aunts, Miss Hermione and Miss Angela Drummond, whom I fancy you know a little, have asked me to go to them—and I am going at once. I shall be sorry to leave you and Catherine, but Mr Grattan explained everything to you, and you know I have no home, and no money—

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till I can earn some!" with a rueful little smile. "I'm afraid I shall never get very rich on my own earnings, Marshall, are not you?"

"I'm afraid not, Miss Valerie," returned Marshall honestly, with tears in his old eyes; "and I pray God you may never need to. I knew your mother, Miss, from the hour that she was your father's wife, and a fairer, frailer flower never was put on this earth. You cost her her life, Miss Valerie, and you were all your father had to cling to in this world when she was gone. Now I want you just to remember that, and that these ladies are the master's sisters, God rest his soul; and I want you to be a bit patient, which it isn't in you to be, with their ways, and the dulness of the life that you'll find at Dale. The Miss Drummonds aren't like their brother, Miss, but they're your own flesh and blood, and they'll help you to the right way, no doubt, though they'll go about it in another way to what you would yourself." And Marshall stopped, abashed at his own temerity, broken with grief now that the actual moment of parting from his young mistress seemed to have arrived, and observing curiously that she was very silent and meek under his well-meaning words of advice.

"I'll remember, Marshall. I'll remember what dear souls you and Catherine have ever been to me and to dear father, too. Will you send her to me now? I want her to help me pack, and I want you to send a telegram for me presently." And she took his hands in hers, and touched his withered cheek with her fresh young lips, as she had done in childhood's days.

Half an hour later Valerie sent the following telegram—

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"TO MISS DRUMMOND,

DALE, DINSDALE.

"Many thanks to you and Aunt Angela. I shall be with you to-night, if I may.—V. D."

And though this telegram was sent off before two o'clock, it was close upon half-past seven in the evening when it was brought to the elder Miss Drummond, at Dale. An upper housemaid presented it to her, while she was just in the act of putting on a pair of short black mittens as the finishing touch to the toilette she had made for dinner.

"A boy from the village wants to see me?" she inquired, with a slight frown at something the maid murmured softly. "What do you mean, Elsom?"

"I mean he wants to tell you about it, ma'am. That is what he says, anyway, and Mr Upton thought I had better let you know."

Miss Hermione clasped a band of jet beads round the bone of her wrist slowly. If Upton thought it necessary that she should see this messenger, she thought so too.

"Take him to the morning-room," she said.

There she presently found a shy youth, who fidgeted first on one leg and then on the other, and nervously twisted his wet cap into a rag ball.

"Mr Parkins he told me to tell you, Miss, that the telegram was sent off from London afore two, but it never come anigh here till after five, and it have took me the best part of two hour and a half to get here with it."

While he spoke, Miss Drummond was reading Valerie's message.

"This is rather serious," she said. "What is the

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cause of the delay, and its delivery in this irregular manner?"

"'Tis the storm, Miss. The wires is broke from Mitching to Dinsdale; and the roads is fair blocked with the snow, Miss. I know it took me——"

"I'm quite aware of the fact that it took you two hours and a half to get here," interrupted Miss Drummond tartly. She rang the bell.

"Upton," she said, to the old, sour-faced man who came in answer, "take this young man away, and let him wait. Is Miss Angela down?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"And is the storm so very bad?"

"So I hear, ma'am."

"Ask Miss Angela to step here, please."

"Angela," she said slowly, as her sister entered, "this is a telegram from Valerie — poor Jack's girl. The storm, which has damaged the wires, and the terrible state of the roads, are responsible for the delay. It was sent before two, and we ought to have had it long ago."

Miss Angela was reading aloud.

"Many thanks to you and Aunt Angela. I shall be with you to-night if I may.—V. D."

"Is not that just what one might have expected of a girl like that?" she said, looking up. "Such rude haste, such ill-mannered impulsiveness. She takes no notice of our first letter, but now, acting upon Mr Grattan's advice, I presume, she accepts our offer without a moment's hesitation."

"I believe she was obliged to leave her present home immediately—that may account in some way for the haste," declared Miss Hermione. "The question is now, Angela, what will she call 'to-night'? Will she have started? . . ."

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"Surely she would wait for our answer!"

"You think she would?"

"My dear sister! She says—*If I may*; she would expect to hear, after that."

"To many, to a girl brought up by Jack, for instance, the 'if I may' would be a mere figure of speech. I was thinking, if she has started——"

"Without giving us time for preparation!"

"It would be just what poor Jack would have done. There are only the express and the slow train to-night. We cannot send to see if she arrives, as the roads are so bad, and——"

"I don't think I should trouble about it. She is surely not so ill-mannered as to make a sort of hotel of our house; besides, if she were coming, she would have mentioned a train. We had better let the lad take our answer to the post office."

Miss Drummond wrote in silence for a few minutes; then she read the message aloud.

"Your telegram delayed by storm. We shall be prepared to receive you on Friday."

"If you cut out the 'we shall be' it will go for sixpence," said Miss Angela, counting carefully.

"Not with the address."

"Well, three halfpence less, anyway—and there is the portage, you know, and a trifle for the lad, I suppose?" Upton was summoned again; and as he took the return message, he announced that dinner was served.

It was nearly nine o'clock before Upton left the ladies in possession of the fruit and two glasses of water, and free to talk upon the subject which filled their minds.

"I regard the introduction of Valerie to Dale as a somewhat hazardous venture," observed Miss Angela.

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"I don't quite see how it could have been avoided, Angela. We are her only relatives, and even though we saw little or nothing of Jack, we cannot shirk our plain duty now that he is dead. I have been thinking, however, that it will be wise to give her a sitting-room for her own use. Young girls are often exceedingly boring, when they are not merely a nuisance. If only Jack's child had been a boy!"

"Ah!" breathed Miss Angela, "If! There would have been the Army or the Navy in view, then, and so much comfort to be derived from a nephew's society."

"Shall we go into the drawing-room?" her sister asked, and added, when they were closed in that room, "we must not borrow trouble. There is no reason why we should keep Valerie longer than it will take to find employment for her. I only hope she is not so remarkable in appearance as she was at eight years old—according to a photograph Jack sent us then. Will you take tea or coffee? Because I am going to have tea, and it is hardly worth while to make both."

"I will have tea, then. I do hope Valerie really did *not* start!"

While one old lady was hoping thus, and the other was giving an order for tea; while both were working diligently upon some coarse, grey flannel, destined to come very near to an unfortunate village child's skin, Miss Valerie Drummond was, as a matter of fact, quietly stamping her pretty little feet on the floor of a railway carriage which she had occupied for several hours, and which belonged to a train that seemed no nearer reaching Dinsdale than when it had stood, fuming noisily, in Paddington Station. The only other occupant of the carriage was a man who had entered it at the last stopping-place, about five

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minutes ago, and who, while feigning to read the evening paper, was watching, with furtive, admiring eyes, the girl's beautiful profile, the scarlet of slightly pathetic lips against the whiteness of her face, and the waves of hair that shone like gold, beneath the black of her hat.

He was just rehearsing some commonplace remark about the weather, which could not well offend, when his fellow-traveller turned swiftly round.

"I wonder," she said to him, meeting his eyes with that clear, frank gaze which was one of her principal charms, "if you know whether this wretched train goes to Dinsdale at all? And if it does, whether it is likely to get there to-night?"

"To Dinsdale?" he returned, removing his cap and keeping it in his hand, "I believe it is supposed to reach there somewhere about nine o'clock. This is the slow train from London, you know, which becomes a local after Deeping, and stops everywhere. You are bound for Dinsdale?"

"I was, when I started!" she declared, with a little smile that revealed very pretty teeth. "I begin to have doubts of being bound for anywhere in particular, now!"

"Oh, you must not give up hope so soon. As a matter of fact, we are close to Mitching, which is not so very far from Dinsdale; but I understand that, for the last hour, it has been a difficult matter to clear the line. Did you ever see such a fall of snow? It is quite the kind of blizzard that heaps up into little mountains before one realises what is happening."

"I hope it won't heap up on the line just yet . . ."

And as Miss Drummond spoke, the train came to such a sudden, unexpected halt, that she was shot forward violently, almost into the stranger's lap.

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"I fear your hope is too late," he declared. "If I am not greatly mistaken, we have run into a snow drift."

He let down the window on his side, but the air was so dense with steam and snow, fine as powdered glass, that he could see nothing. The wind swept through the open space in a great gust that blew the papers about, and threatened the light. The engine was making a deafening noise; the officials were running about, talking, shouting, answering a hundred questions put to them by the passengers, at random.

"Do not be alarmed," the stranger said, obliged to shout at her. "I will get out and see what has happened."

Ten minutes passed before he returned; and Valerie saw that there was a rather anxious expression upon his face, though he spoke cheerfully.

"It is as I thought," he said. "There is no chance of getting away from here for hours. I fear you will get very cold and hungry long before we can hope to proceed—and I don't quite know what to suggest. It is ten minutes' walk along the line to the next station, and when one gets there, there is not even a hotel or an inn—nothing."

"How very disagreeable! I suppose I must just sit here and wait, and freeze," with a little laugh.

He smiled back at her; it was good to see her accepting the situation so easily, even merrily. It was plain that she was not in the least afraid, either, which simplified matters greatly.

"Were you going to Dinsdale, too?" she asked.

"No; just from one house to another, and only a little way down the line. But while you remain here I shall stay with you. It is not nice to think of you being alone for hours."

He stood on the foot-board with his face partly

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turned towards the cheerless outlook ; but Valerie had an opportunity of studying it. It was not particularly good-looking, certainly not handsome ; but it was exceedingly kind, and its whole attraction lay in some expression of the mouth, some very gentle light which lay deep down in the grey-blue eyes. His skin was very bronzed, as with travel or exposure to the open air ; his hair, what his barber had left him of it, was brown, with here and there a suspicion of grey ; and he was tall, straight, and broad-shouldered.

He turned round suddenly.

"If I were—for myself—" he said, "I should walk. Are you a good walker?"

"Very."

"Will you let me take you with me, then? Except the station beyond, there is nothing nearer than Mitching ; but I know every inch of the country ; and across it, by short cuts, it is not very far. Will you come?"

Valerie was already standing up, and now one foot was on the board.

"You are very good," she said, while he took her hands and helped her carefully to the ground. "I would far rather be walking, and getting a little nearer—home." Still she did not move immediately, and her companion said :

"May I present myself? My name is Wingate—I am going on to Delmar Lodge. Perhaps you know . . ."

"No ; I am quite a stranger here."

She moved a little in the direction of the lights as she spoke, and he kept close to her side, now and again putting a warning hand on her arm, as she hastened onward.

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She did not tell him her name, or anything, but that she wanted to get to Dinsdale. It did not convey much, and he could not well ask more; but he wished he knew with whom she was staying. Her frank acceptance of his assistance, her ease of manner, the absence of any kind of foolish hesitation on her part, pleased him. He noticed that she carried herself with extreme grace, and he decided that she was married.

"You have luggage — a maid with you?" he inquired.

"Only my dressing-bag, which you are carrying—no maid."

"Then I think we ought to be getting on. The sooner we reach Mitching, the sooner you will be able to set your people at rest about you."

"Thank you, yes."

She kept easily at his side, walking with as much freedom as the high wind and the darkness and the heavy roads would admit. They spoke seldom, because the fine snow blew in their teeth, and they had to roar out every word at each other. She never once showed the faintest trace of uneasiness or fatigue; and in spite of all the disadvantages, they kept going at a steady pace. And when, far ahead, she caught the uncertain twinkle of lights, she breathed a little sigh of relief.

"That is the beginning of Mitching," Wingate said. "Are you very tired?"

"Not very."

Once more there was silence. They came at last to a dismal, deserted market-place, at one side of which there was a small inn. One or two men who were lounging about the big wooden gates touched their caps, recognising Wingate; and the inn-keeper gave

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him and his companion a respectful and hearty greeting.

"Dear, dear me, sir! Why, you must have the sight of a owl to have got over the roads to-night! It have been a storm, but it's wearin' itself out this part, now. Sir Grenvil, he have sent down from the Lodge twice, sir, and hardly a horse been able to stand."

"I want you to find one that will stand now, anyway, Hanson; and to allow this lady to rest a little while in your parlour."

"Why, most certainly, Mr Wingate. My old horse Tom, and the rough cart—they don't mind no sort of weather! This way, sir. Now, ma'am, I'll send my wife to you."

"And I am going to send you some mulled wine, which I really insist upon you drinking," added Wingate, as he followed the host out of the room.

It was fully twenty minutes before he returned, and in the meantime Mrs Hanson had managed to dry Valerie's boots a little, and to remove all traces of snow and dirt from her clothes.

When Valerie found herself comfortably seated in the cart, wrapped round with many rugs, she saw that Wingate was mounting to the seat beside her.

"You are coming?" she exclaimed.

"Unless you object."

"No, of course not! But—you will never get home yourself—Mrs Hanson told me that it is nearly seven miles to Dale!"

"And if it were seventy I should see you safely there. You are in my charge, you know, Miss . . ."

"I am Valerie Drummond—I am going to my aunts, the Misses Drummond, at Dale."

Wingate lifted his cap again, as he took the reins

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into one hand, and the next moment the horse, feeling its head free, started forward.

It was perforce a long and a cold drive, and even in the rough cart behind "Tom," who scorned to be upset by the weather, it was not an easy one. Wingate had to devote his whole attention to the animal, and conversation was very nearly impossible in the howling wind.

"I wish I could have got you a better conveyance," he managed to say, once; but Valerie shook her head, and declared she was quite comfortable.

She was thinking to herself that she hoped he knew no one belonging to her world that she had left behind; he was wondering if Grenvil Delmar, the man at whose house, here, he was staying, knew the Misses Drummond, and hoping that he did. The name recalled certain memories vaguely; he was not clear what they were, but he was certain that it was very familiar to him.

"Can you just distinguish that huge, white thing that looks like a small mountain?" he asked, by and by, pointing with his whip. "Well, that is a cliff, and the house you want lies just this side of it."

The next moment he was shouting lustily to the lodge-keeper, with evidently little effect. The gates were closed, but no one came to open them, and finally Wingate got down and opened them himself. A large, white house faced them, a house in which there was no sign of light or life. The cart came to a halt at the door.

"Is it very late?" inquired Valerie. "I believe everyone has gone to bed!"

Wingate looked at his watch by the light of a match.

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"It is five minutes to twelve. Did they not expect you?"

"I wired—early."

"They may not have received it. The storm, you know. We must rouse someone." And he went up the two wide steps and hammered on the door loudly.

Valerie was shivering a little when he returned to her.

"You are cold?" he said.

"No; it looks so dark, and cheerless—I am almost afraid——"

The sound of slow footsteps within, the ringing of a bell, also within, and the scraping of heavy bolts came to them. Valerie turned to her companion with out-stretched hand, and a little grateful, yet wistful smile.

"How can I thank you enough? But for you I should be in that wretched train still! Thank you, so much more than I can say."

"Please do not, it has been a very great pleasure to help you even so little. May I . . ."

"Well, if it's anybody that wants to come in, why don't they come?" demanded a thin, peevish voice from the half-open doorway—a voice that Valerie soon learned belonged to Upton.

"It is Miss Drummond, who has been delayed by the storm," Wingate replied, with a touch of severity in his voice. Instinctively, he caught himself giving some explanation of her late arrival.

The door opened more widely. Upton drew the overcoat which he had donned in haste more closely about him, and held the flickering candle high above his head.

"Good-bye," murmured Valerie again, as she drew her hand from his and hurried up the steps.

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She was in the hall, the door was closed, and she was following Upton, whose very back, the heels of whose very slippers, bristled with indignation. She was being taken up a broad flight of heavily carpeted stairs, at the top of which two tall, angular women stood close together, in flannel wrappers held tightly round their thin forms, with their grey hair falling limply over their shoulders, with their eyes fixed on Valerie's face wonderingly, disapprovingly. Upton, with his eyes discreetly bent upon the floor, retired. And then Valerie spoke.

"I—I—am so sorry!" she murmured, in a voice from which all the courage had fled. "There was no sign of a storm when I started; and here it was terrible. I——"

"Your arrival in this—er—haste, to-day of all days, is certainly a little unfortunate," observed Miss Angela, frigidly. "We quite thought you would wait to hear from us. I am your Aunt Angela, this is your Aunt Hermione."

Valerie presented a timid hand and cheek to each.

"I am sorry," she began again; but Miss Drummond interrupted with a shiver.

"Will you come into my room a moment? It is certainly less chilly than out here." And Valerie followed both women to a bedroom on the right. It was dimly lighted by one candle, the fire had gone out, and the bed hid itself behind dark brocaded curtains. Her aunts sat upon the edge of it and regarded her somewhat sternly.

"You started before receiving our telegram, then?" Miss Drummond said.

"Oh, yes; I came at once, as soon as I had sent you word. I—I—did not think that you would not want me, or I would have waited."

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"We suggested that you should come on Friday."

"I am sorry," breathed Valerie, without originality but with genuine regret. "You had invited me, you know, and left me to decide, I thought, upon accepting the invitation, and it—it—seemed best for me to come at once." One sister was looking "I told you so" at the other, and Valerie was standing, a sweet, hesitating figure, before them. "You—you are not vexed?"

"Not vexed—no," said Miss Angela, who had no idea that she was not telling the truth. "We are not quite used to being swooped down upon as though we were hotel proprietors. However, there it is, and since you are here you are welcome," stiffly.

Valerie bit her lip and coloured; but she managed to crush back the natural retort that trembled on her tongue's tip, and to murmur "Thank you."

"But," said Miss Drummond, "I don't understand how you managed to get here at all."

"I got a trap at the 'Hare and Hounds,' Mitching; at least, a fellow-traveller whom I met in the train, and who helped me very kindly, got it for me."

"But how did you get to Mitching? It is six miles by rail, and we were told the line was blocked."

"It was. How far up or down the line, I don't know. It meant staying and freezing in the train all alone for the night, or letting him take me with him to the inn."

"What!" The single word left both pair of lips simultaneously; the tone in which it was uttered defies description. Both ladies got off the bed's edge and sank into chairs, and Valerie took this as permission to be seated herself.

"It isn't so far, if you know the short cuts across

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country," she said swiftly; and as they were silent, only questioning her with their pale eyes, she went on: "*I* don't, of course, but he did—I daresay he lives about here—he said he was staying somewhere near, anyhow. He offered to take me to Mitching, and I was only too glad to accept his assistance."

Miss Drummond was startled into murmuring, "Good heavens!"

And her sister added, "Do you mean to tell me that you left the train with an unknown *man*! and walked miles across the country with him at, perhaps, eleven o'clock at *night*!"

Valerie nodded.

"Why not?" she asked.

"Why not? Have you no sense of the fitness of things?"

"It was a good deal better than stopping in the train alone, when all the passengers and officials had left it, and being, perhaps, robbed and murdered!"

"Nonsense! Some nice lady—or a man with his wife and——"

"Oh, this man may have a wife and a dozen children for all I know," laughed Valerie. "I can't see that it makes the least difference."

"Perhaps not," with asperity; "but it would have been at least more—more—respectable."

"I don't understand you, Aunt Angela. There is an accident. I am stranded, and my companion—a man—is kind enough to show me the way to the nearest town. He finds me a horse and trap, and is also kind enough to drive me here. Would not you have done as I did in similar circumstances?"

"Never!" breathed Miss Hermione.

"But why not?"

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"My dear Valerie! With a man—alone—at that hour!"

"Man or woman, what does it matter so long as it was company and someone who knew the way? What would you have been afraid of?"

Miss Angela stretched her scraggy throat in an effort to swallow more easily; Miss Hermione looked at their niece hard, and both ladies decided to drop the subject.

"Your rooms are prepared, though we did not expect you till Friday," one of the sisters said, rising. "You will like to go to them now."

Miss Angela moved to the door, Valerie following; but when she reached it, she turned back. Her cheeks were flushed, her lovely eyes very full of tears. Her heart cried aloud for some little touch of love, of sympathy—her tender heart, that had been so recently and deeply wounded.

"Don't be angry with me!" she pleaded.

"We are not angry, Valerie, but we hope that in the future you will conduct yourself with—with—more decorum."

"Aunt Angela, Aunt Hermione, I—I—will try to be—to do what you wish. I am, after all, your brother's child. I——"

"I think," said Angela, "that we are likely to be reminded of that very forcibly."

Then Valerie went out of the room, and her heart, that could have been made to soften towards them now and for ever, grew hard. Her gentler mood was gone. Her desire to try to be what they wished never came to her again.

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VI

VALERIE slept the sleep of one who is worn out mentally and bodily; all through the night she dreamed of trains that would not move onward, of dim country roads, of a hard-visaged pair of women whose very voices sent a chill to her heart. And in the morning she woke unrefreshed, to find that she had but twenty minutes in which to dress.

While she filled the bath, a housemaid informed her that breakfast was at nine, and that the Misses Drummond were generally downstairs at half-past eight, winter and summer.

Valerie, who had never had breakfast at a table in her life, who had been accustomed ever since she could remember to having her tray brought to her room, to reading, in later years, the newspapers between her sips of coffee, and to getting through her toilette somewhere about noon, felt as though the maid had emptied, by mistake, the can of cold water down her back instead of into the bath.

To be down at half-past eight! It would require months of practice! Her luggage had not yet arrived, and she feared to don the white kimono, with black stalks strutting about all over it, that reposed in her dressing-bag, and which was the only gown she possessed at the present moment, except the one in which she had arrived last night. That, however, had been very carefully brushed by an admiring housemaid, who seldom saw anything of

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the kind, and was seized upon gratefully by Valerie, as she heard the clock striking nine.

Arrived in the lower hall, Upton informed her that "the dining-room" was "through the narrow passage on the right," in acid tones, for which she wished she might have boxed his ears. Contenting herself with hoping that he would trip up with the tray, she found her way thither, and was considerably relieved to discover that she was, after all, the first to arrive.

Her aunts, coming in a few moments later, paused for a long moment after their "good-morning," and evidently forgot their breakfast, as well as that it is impolite to stare. Miss Angela moved a restless hand across her eyes, as though something in the girl's beauty dazzled them unpleasantly. Valerie stood with her back to the fire, fastening a hook at her wrist-band, while, with her head slightly bent, she looked up under her lids from one severe face to the other.

This was the girl who was to be dependent upon them for a time, this the girl for whom they were to find employment (the bare thought presented difficulties already), this the girl who would, they had decided, submit to their management! This the girl who should humbly and gladly snatch at their offer of a home, who, they supposed, had been living in miserable dingy "rooms," and who, they had secretly hoped, would know how to behave herself when she took up her residence beneath their roof! This the woman! who stood before them now, beautiful with a beauty so uncommon that it was painfully apparent even to their unwilling eyes; gowned in dull black—but black of such style, such perfect cut—black which began in a little soft, filmy-bit of transparent lace at her throat and across her

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chest, and set closely to her perfect figure, and ended at her feet in a narrow border of fox fur! Black which enhanced the whiteness of her skin, and, more than all, the rich copper tint of her wonderful hair that, with the flickering light of the fire upon it, shone like threads of gold in a red sunset! This the woman! whose every movement was full of grace, and gave indication of perfect ease; and who now seemed to be waiting for them to speak, with her soft eyes, that held a mingling of merriment and quaint half fear, fixed disconcertingly upon first one hard face and then the other!

Miss Angela cleared her throat.

"Did you sleep well?" she inquired.

"Pretty well, thank you." Valerie was waiting for them to be seated, and then took her place at the side of the table, between them.

"It would have been better if I had not dreamed that your butler would not let me in, and that the snow was freezing me."

There was no answering smile to this allusion to last night's arrival, and Valerie sipped her coffee in silence.

"Perhaps," suggested Miss Hermione, "you did not have sufficient blankets?"

"Oh, I was very comfortable, thank you."

Silence again, broken only by the crunching of Miss Angela's toast. Her niece, while seeming to attend only to her breakfast, was studying both ladies carefully. They were sufficiently alike to be instantly recognised as sisters; they were tall, angular women, who wore their old-fashioned garments with an air of superiority and triumph, tipped with a little pitying scorn for those of their sex who were differently attired. They had iron grey hair, fresh complexions,

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pale blue eyes fringed with light brown lashes, thin, straight mouths, and good, white, even teeth. They wore prim, dark dresses, almost guiltless of trimming, short, full skirts, and flat-heeled, square-toed boots.

Altogether they were so unlike any women she had ever known, so unlike anyone she could have imagined belonging to her father's family, that for a moment Valerie felt a little chill creeping over her. She had not forgotten her reception last night. She would never forget it, and the memory would prejudice her against these women all her life.

After breakfast, Miss Hermione invited her to come to the morning-room.

"Angela does most of the housekeeping," she said. "She goes to see Barker now, but if you will come with me, Valerie, I should like to talk to you. Can you bear to tell me a little about your father, and yourself," she added, when they were seated in a rather bare, cheerless room which seemed to look on to the wall that possibly surrounded a kitchen garden. "You see," with that tone coming into her voice which suggested always to Valerie's ears sarcasm veiled with a little lame playfulness, "we really know so little about either." The tears came thickly into the girl's eyes at the mention of her father, and for a moment she did not answer.

"If it makes you cry," began Miss Hermione, without much sympathy; but Valerie interrupted a little sharply—

"I am not going to cry. What is it you want to know?"

It was not exactly an encouraging speech, or one prettily put; and her aunt set her lips tightly, while the deep hollows at her temples seemed to grow deeper.

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"I understood Mr Grattan to say that your father left nothing—not even a little for you."

"He left nothing for me or for anyone. He had nothing to leave. He never made much money, and what he did make he spent and gave away most generously. He never refused any who were in need. He was a splendid artist, but he could not get many people to believe it; and besides, I don't think he ever cared much, after mother died."

"That, at anyrate, was twenty years ago," returned Miss Hermione, with slightly uplifted brows, that somehow had the effect of irritating her niece.

"And what of it? I suppose a man may be faithful to even a memory for twenty years—though it is rarely that he is faithful to a living creature for as many weeks," she added, with a touch of unconscious bitterness that made her aunt look up sharply. Valerie caught the look, remembered what she had said, and coloured. The elder lady looked exceedingly shocked.

"I do not call that a pretty speech," she said, stiffly.

"The truth is seldom pretty or pleasant," returned Valerie. "Anyway, father never forgot mother."

"I—we only saw your mother once. She was a very remarkable looking woman; you are very like her."

"Oh, I shall never be half so lovely. I have seen pictures of her; Marshall and his wife, and Bertha, our servants, you know, told me of her often. They say——"

"Did you keep three servants?"

"Yes," indifferently, "lately. We had not room for more, after we went to live at the studio."

"Oh! I suppose you managed to help your father

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in some ways—otherwise ;” curiously, “you must have found it a little dull.”

“Dull! With father, and all the students everlastingly in and out of the place! Oh, it was never dull! The house was full from morning till night, and generally from night till morning.”

“Indeed! I should imagine that sort of life was neither conducive to work nor to the saving of money; nor can it have been particularly good for a young girl.”

“Well, as I’ve told you, father never could save money; and as for work, why, he was one of those happy-go-lucky, sweet-natured creatures who ought to have had millions with which to do good, and never have been obliged to do a day’s work except for his own pleasure.”

“I think, Valerie, that you cannot be aware that you are talking very foolishly. Our lives are ordered, set out, and there is work of some sort for us all. I do not wish to say anything that you might think unkind about your father, now that he is dead . . . ”

“No, please don’t!” advised Valerie, in a tone that warned even Miss Hermione to pick her words carefully.

“ . . . now that he is dead. But one has no right to be idle when there is work to do, no right to be generous to others when there are one’s own to think of. I hope you will take that to heart, and remember, that in earning your own living, which you will have to do presently, it is your duty to look to the future, to put by for illness, or old age, so that you may never be a burden upon anyone.”

Valerie coloured to the roots of her lovely hair, not with shame, but with anger, and with the wild effort she

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made to check the words that rose to her lips. How she would grow to hate these women! She felt it. With every word they spoke, she knew she should have hard work to be civil to them for a week.

"Which reminds me," she returned, a touch of haughtiness creeping into her voice, "that you told Mr Grattan you and Aunt Angela were willing to help me to look for work. I am afraid I shall have to trouble you to do this, because I have not the least idea of setting about it myself."

"It will be no trouble. Your Aunt Angela and I will be glad to help you. But at the same time we are willing to keep you here for the present—till you have time to recover a little from your loss. So we will talk about the work later on. What is there for which you have a fancy?"

"I am afraid there is nothing. What are the employments for women, to-day?"

"The lady-like employments," corrected Miss Hermione.

Valerie shrugged her shoulders.

"If by lady-like, you mean teaching little children, or acting as companion to old people, I don't think I have a fancy that way at all. I am certain that I should simply loathe it! Moreover, the little ones would bowl me out in one day—I couldn't teach a thing of three! And besides that, the governess and companion business are quite out of date—they've vanished since you were young, Aunt Hermione. I think I could look after peoples' dogs, or their horses, and I could superintend the sending up of a dinner. Then to hark back to 'shop'—I had not thought of it before, but there's quite an art in being a good model."

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"*Valerie!*" Miss Hermione's thin hands went up in horror, her fine nostrils spread in indignation.

"I expect you've heard silly things about them," said the youngest Miss Drummond easily, but her aunt waved wildly for silence.

"What I have heard has not been 'silly'! I request you not to mention those—er—objectionable sort of people again. Would you like to go out," with sudden inspiration and change of tone. "We do not have luncheon till two; and the sea is quite handy—if you like the sea."

"I love it."

"Then go if you like, and make its acquaintance at Dale. I expect you have been used to going out alone? In my young days girls did not go out unless accompanied by a maid; but, as you reminded me just now, those old-fashioned prejudices which should be natural, born of—er—niceness, have vanished with the lady-like employments for women! Wrap yourself up warmly; the winds are very cold here."

"The winds are not colder than their hearts," thought Valerie, as she went up to her rooms. Her own heart was chilled. This life was going to be so much harder than she had thought. Indeed, she had thought about it very little. She had come here on the impulse of the moment; and now, the memory of what had driven her to seek the safety of the home offered to her, brought the hot colour to her face. Yesterday all had been haste and bustle, her one desire to get away, quite away, from her own world. Then she had thought of her aunts' home as a refuge—she had thought that she might dwell there in peace and seclusion, and none would ever know that she had been shamed and humiliated as she had been that day. Then she

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refused to give herself time to think, lest she should be tempted into drawing back; now she knew that she had had many hours in which to think and reflect, and she began to realise a little what this new life would be.

Already she felt resentment towards the women who had opened their doors to her. She dreaded their questions, their severe glances. Her blood boiled at their little half bantering, half bitter remarks, tipped always with some tone that suggested a perfect sense of their own moral superiority over their fellows. Yet a deeper flush spread over her face at the knowledge which came to her like a blow, that if these women could see right into her heart, if the pages of the last year of her life could be unfolded before their hard eyes, they would take her by the shoulders and put her far outside their doors. They would never give her pity or sympathy; they would only give her scorn. She had made up her mind to forget—she had begun to find out already that forgetfulness was not so easy. She was honest and truthful by nature, and, first of all, it shamed her, it lowered her in her own sight, to know that she was dishonest to those to whom she owed her very bread. They took her into their home because they did not know—they would never know—she had no right to resent anything they said or did. In that hateful knowledge lay the sting which must for ever rob life of its sweetness, which must for ever take from her life its chief joys.

"I have been talking to Valerie," announced Miss Hermione, when, half an hour later, her sister joined her. "She has gone for a walk with Mr. Elm. I have been talking to her, and—and—don't you know,

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Angela, I am afraid the girl has not a—a—nice mind. She has a freedom of manner, too, which I suppose she acquired in the studio. I begin to fear that we shall never find her nice work, or that if she gets it, she will never keep it."

"She certainly will not if she does her hair in that remarkable style, and wears such—such—very peculiar gowns. I call that dress she has on to-day almost indecent, and quite unsuited for breakfast!"

"Her luggage has not arrived, you know, Angela," said Miss Drummond, who prided herself on being strictly just.

Angela, who was obstinate, tightened her thin lips into a straight line, and shrugged one lean shoulder upwards.

"I discovered that Jack had a *house* in Chelsea! They kept three servants, lately, and formerly, evidently more. Whilst we pictured him struggling for a living, they were living in luxury!"

"My dear Hermione, while Jack was her father, you must not lose sight of the fact that she'd a mother too; from what we know of *her*, we must not expect too much of the daughter!"

Miss Hermione nodded. She also said something more about duty; and then, with a sigh, she took up her work-basket.

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VII

MEANTIME Valerie was mounting the narrow path which led straight from the Dale grounds to the top of the cliff.

Arrived at the highest point, she paused and turned her face to the keen salt breeze. It was glorious, it gave her new life; yet it brought a touch of sadness to her heart. There was something in the utter loneliness, in the stretch of bare, deserted beach, which seemed in perfect harmony with her lonely life. The dull roar of the waves, their melancholy, backward wash, the sullen sky above, and behind her the dim, deserted land—they were like her moods.

She stood for a long while with her face towards the breeze; it blew her hair into little moist rings, and tried vainly to unsettle her small hat. And it did something more, it brought to her nostrils, beside the fresh, salt smell that she loved, the unmistakable odour of a most admirable cigar (Valerie was a judge)—a cigar which someone was certainly smoking close at hand. There was another path below hers, and curiosity prompting her, she leant far forward, at the risk of overbalancing. In the heavy white sea-mist her eyes met other eyes that were not quite strange to her; they rested upon a face that she remembered perfectly, that had upon it the glow of splendid health; the features of which were clear-cut and strong, the keen eyes, that she was sure could be terrible in anger, and soft as a woman's in tenderness, grey-blue. She

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was looking down, silently, upon the man who had piloted her to Mitching last night, and afterwards driven her to Dale. And she gave such a start that he put up a quick warning hand.

"Be careful!" he said sharply. A moment later he came round by a cut in the cliff and was at her side.

"I was afraid you were going to fall! Good morning, Miss Drummond," holding out his hand. "I was just coming to Dale to find out whether that servant with the vicious little voice had eaten you! I really hardly liked leaving you with him."

"Coming to Dale!" with real consternation in her voice. "Oh, please don't do that—never do that—at least to—to—see me."

"Thank you!"

"Oh, I don't mean it rudely or inhospitably," she said, with quick distress. "Only—they—my aunts would not like it. They were awfully annoyed because I walked with you to Mitching last night, and you drove me home afterwards."

"Indeed!" Wingate's eyebrows were lifted a little, and there was a smile about the corners of his mouth. "They have some peculiar notions as to how you should have spent your time, then."

"They have; they would have preferred that I remained in the train till morning. But tell me," quickly, "how did you get back over those horrible roads? I thought about you every time I woke in the night, and how you must have hated me during the return journey."

"That was good of you—to think of me, I mean. For the rest, you are quite at fault. I cannot imagine anyone *hating* you. So you think I had better not call at Dale? Not even if I come with Delmar?—

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he is the man I am staying with, not very far from here—who, having met the Misses Drummond three years ago at a church concert, could make that quite sufficient excuse for bringing me to see you?"

"Oh, if you come with your friend I have nothing to do with it."

"Pardon me, you would have everything to do with it."

"But my aunts would not know that," she returned, looking up at him amusedly under her lashes.

In the broad light of day he thought her even more lovely than he had thought her last night. Beneath gas or lamp light she had seemed a trifle too white; in the rough wind her cheeks gained colour and her eyes brilliance. Wingate was trying to puzzle out their colour.

"Are you going for a walk?" he asked now, and added, before she could reply, "Let me show you the quaintest bit of the sea-shore for miles."

She acquiesced by stepping out briskly beside him.

"So you don't think you will like this place?" he questioned, presently.

"Did I say so?"

"No; but your eyes did when you spoke of your aunts."

"They are very tell-tale, then."

"I think they are. Still, I am right?"

"You are very persistent. But if you want to know, really, I think I shall hate it. The place seems sweet—it is the narrow life I shall never endure."

"I am so glad you told me your name last night," he said, somewhat irrelevantly. "I was afraid you were not going to. You only said you were going to Dale, which was not much to go upon."

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"To go upon?"

"Miss Drummond," with a little frank laugh that was very pleasant, "I am nothing if not truthful. When we were in the train, at first, I thought you might be going to visit at some house of, perhaps, mutual friends—I hoped you were. When I heard you were bound for Dale, I remembered with regret that I knew not a living soul there, and I concluded that you were married, and going to your own home."

"Whatever put such an idea into your head?" asked Valerie, annoyed with herself because she felt that her cheeks were hot beneath his glance.

"It was your manner, I think; the utter absence of any silly nonsense. Oh, you know what I mean—your acceptance of the situation, and my protection for the moment, with the very charming grace of a thorough woman of the world; not with either the awkwardness of a mere inexperienced girl, or with the brusque off-handedness of the mannish young lady who wears a very short skirt and a Norfolk jacket, and . . . but what is amusing you?"

Valerie shook her head; she was indulging in the first long, hearty laugh that she had enjoyed for several days.

"I was wishing Aunt Hermione could hear you?"

"I wish you liked your home better," he said, with real sympathy that brought tears to her eyes, which tears emboldened him to put a gentle, detaining hand on her arm. "Of course I am only a stranger to you," he added swiftly, almost apologetically; "but we were companions in misfortune last night—the sort of misfortune with which, if one choose, one can bridge over a good gulf; and—but I was going to tell you how it was that your name, directly I heard

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it, seemed familiar to me. I knew a man—what is the matter?" Valerie had come to a sudden halt, a little involuntary cry had left her lips, and her hand had gone out, as though to silence him. She forced a smile at his hasty question.

"Yes? You knew a man—do I remind you of him?"

"It is a very odd thing that you should ask me that," returned Wingate. "In a way, you do. It is your voice, I think. It is years ago, twenty, I daresay, since I met this man in Rome. His name was the same as yours. He was an artist, and at that time terribly down on his luck. He had just lost his wife, poor fellow—a mere girl, whom he simply worshipped; and she had left him with a little helpless infant that he seemed at his wits' ends to know what do with. I was only a boy myself at the time, but I remember being deeply impressed. He was such a thorough good chap. But I never saw him from that time to this, or heard of him, until, quite by accident, I heard the other day that he was dead—only a few weeks ago. Why," looking at her sharply, and with great concern, "there are tears in your eyes—what a brute I am! I have made you cry! . . ."

She ran the back of one little bare hand swiftly across her eyes. "He was my father—that is all," she explained simply. "He died a little while before I came here; and I," with a little watery smile, "was that helpless infant! Did you ever see me? Was I red and hideous?" Her quick transition from distress to amusement robbed him of the fear that he had touched on very dangerous ground.

"Is it possible?" he said. "Is it possible that in you I find the daughter of old Jack Drummond! What a little world it is after all! You cannot refuse

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to be friends with me now, Miss Drummond, you cannot say that your aunts will refuse to know me. Remember our first meeting dates back to twenty years ago, and your father and I were great friends, though we lost sight of each other after he left Rome."

"You never met him afterwards?" she questioned, with a touch of uneasiness. "You—you — never heard of him, of us, in London . . ."

"Never. You may be sure I should have hunted him up. But then, for years, I have lived very little in England."

"And father never made any great name." A little sigh escaped her, not for the failure of her father only, but in intense gratitude that this man knew nothing of him from the time they had parted in Rome. It was very pleasant to talk with someone to whom you could say what was in your mind, without weighing every word first; it was nice to feel that you might laugh quite aloud; and it was good to hear a kindly voice that had no ring of superiority, no sarcasm in it. But for all that, this man's presence was like a breath from the world against which she had turned her back yesterday, that world which she wanted to forget. And she was saying to herself—

"This is coming to a place where I thought I should be unlikely to meet any but lean curates and country matrons. This is leaving my own world behind!"

"You cannot refuse to be friends with me now," Wingate was saying again, because she had not answered that part of his remark.

"No; but still, we shall rarely meet."

"Why? You are not going to bury yourself in this place all your life. You will be going back to town."

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"I am going to stay here—or—or—somewhere similar—always."

"And I stay with Grenvil Delmar half a dozen times a year."

"Perhaps; it makes no difference."

"I beg your pardon. You told me just now that I was persistent—I fear you must think me even worse. We have passed that bit of the shore I was going to show you, also. Would you like to go back?"

"Now you are vexed with me, and you have been so kind, and you were once a friend of father's, and, oh, don't you see that I do not want to be disagreeable, or . . ."

She had stretched out her bare hand, and Wingate took it in a firm, warm clasp.

"I understand," he said. "You are a little out of love with yourself and all the world to-day, Miss Drummond; and I believe I am right when I imagine that your aunts have not shown you quite the kind of sympathy which should be given to you now, of all times. I am just a stranger to you, but do believe that I feel for you deeply, and that I am more sorry than I can say to hear of my old friend's death."

"You are good," she murmured very low. And then they walked back, almost to Dale, in silence.

"I am only going to say good-bye till to-morrow," he declared, when he left her. "I shall make Delmar come over and bring me too, on the strength of that church concert three years ago."

"What a life for a child like that!" Wingate said to himself as he strode back in the homeward direction. "She is almost afraid of those old women

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already; I expect poor Drummond left her dependent upon them."

And he thought contentedly upon their meeting and upon another, which he determined should take place before long; and he lit a fresh cigar and pulled at it reflectively, while there came to him the pleasant memory of sweet eyes that had looked at him through tears, of whose colour he could not yet be sure, of a plaintive red mouth, and of a low voice that rung in his ears like a haunting bell.

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VIII

WINGATE had a good deal of difficulty in inducing his host to call upon the Misses Drummond. He had mentioned the ladies' name to him on that night when Valerie had been stranded in the storm; but Delmar seemed to take singularly little interest. He knew them—very slightly, yes. He thought that during that time when his mother had lived at the Lodge, they had met. It was three years ago, and, as far as Delmar could remember, they were extremely unattractive women. He could not quite understand Wingate's anxiety to make their acquaintance.

He said so, this afternoon, just a week from that day on which Wingate had declared to Valerie his intention of storming Dale on the morrow.

"This is the first time in my life that I have ever seen you so keen about anything, Kerr," Delmar remarked, with a laugh. "What is it that you are trying to induce me to do? Call upon two old ladies who live at Dale, and take you with me? I'm not sure they would not absolutely shut the door in our faces! I should hate," a little plaintively, "to be snubbed by a woman who wore flat-heeled, square-toed boots. There is only one thing I distinctly remember the Misses Drummond by, and that is the shape of their ankles—it was awful! No, suggest

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something better, my dear Kerr—throw in a little youth and beauty, and——”

“If you will go to Dale you will be amply rewarded, so far as youth and beauty are concerned,” returned Wingate, “though I know well that you are blind to both.”

“You malign me—not blind. And now I am getting, as the children say, warm. The lady of the storm, the maiden whom you rescued from the snow, and who by the way delayed you about four hours on your journey here last week—it is she who is the attraction.”

“Precisely. You could not possibly suppose it was either of the women of the ankles! I am quite frank with you, Grenvil. Miss Drummond interests and attracts me. I am quite sure she is very unhappy, or will be, with her aunts; I—I—knew her father, many years ago: you must remember having heard of him anyhow, Jack Drummond the artist?”

“Certainly I have. So she’s his daughter, is she?”

“I’ve been telling you so for a week.”

“Forgive me. I am becoming not only selfish, but absent minded. Tell me about her again; I swear to give you my whole attention.”

“There is very little to tell,” returned Wingate, walking thoughtfully up and down the room. “As I’ve said, this lady is a daughter of Jack Drummond, who died a little while ago, and, it is my firm belief, left his child dependent upon his sisters. You know more about them than I do, doubtless; but from the very little Miss Drummond has said of them and her life with them—I have met her twice during her rambles abroad—and from the manner in which I judge that she was received on the night of her

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unfortunately late arrival at Dale, I should imagine they were the sort of people to drive a girl out of her mind. It is monstrous to think of a child like that leading such a life! You will have the house full presently, and I know you would be the first to help to make it a little less dull for her if you could."

"There are thousands of other young and lovely women whose lives are dull and narrow," began Delmar, with a twinkle in his eye.

"It may be, but I don't happen to be interested in them, you see. I expect if these old women only saw the child speaking to me, or heard of it, they'd shut her up in the house like a prisoner, and——"

"And so you want to be introduced to her properly; quite right. And you want me to go and make love to those awful old women, and, if possible, bring the child here presently, when the house fills up. You shall have your way. What I can do towards it I promise you I will do, with all my heart. If Pat interests herself in her . . ."

"Ah, then she will have the best time in the world. I pin my faith to Pat." Wingate spoke lightly, but there was a ring of genuine affection in his voice; and into Delmar's eyes there came for a moment an expression that only came into them at the mention of this woman's name, a light that only she ever saw in them. Even now, he kept his face turned away from his friend for a short moment.

"As there is no time like the present," he said, after a short pause, "suppose we storm the inmates of Dale this afternoon?"

And so it happened that as the clocks were striking five, Upton opened the great hall door of

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Dale in his very own grudging, uninviting way, and a minute later that of the drawing-room.

"Sir Grenvil Delmar and Mr Wingate," he announced, in his sour, petulant treble.

Miss Hermione Drummond looked at her sister, and both ladies looked at Valerie, who half rose in her chair near the tea table, sat down again swiftly, and coloured crimson from her throat to the roots of her pretty hair.

Grenvil Delmar, advancing, greeted both ladies as though they were quite his best friends and he was in the habit of calling upon them at least once a week. He reminded them swiftly and deftly of his meeting with them on a former occasion, and tactfully ignored that it was years ago; he recalled to their minds, without any difficulty, his mother, and lied beautifully and most convincingly while he told them how often she spoke of them in her letters, how interested she was, still, in their village work, and how she had given him countless messages for them, which, he was ashamed to say, he had never delivered.

That he did so thus tardily, to-day, he declared was because, at last, his conscience had pricked him with severity as he was driving past the gates of Dale. And he gave imaginary messages from his mother with ease and fluency that took Wingate's breath away; he talked so winningly and charmingly to the forbidding old ladies, with a certain manner that, for the moment at least, won them over to his side, introduced Wingate, and was made known with him to the youngest Miss Drummond so naturally and pleasantly, that not even Miss Angela could frame at once the frigid speeches that she was longing to utter.

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She and her sister thanked him slowly for delivering his mother's messages (they each kept a mental eye upon the fund now being raised for the new schools, and they were sufficiently snobbish at heart to treat this man, who was distinctly somebody in the neighbourhood, with a little more courtesy than they would have treated a nobody), offered him tea, and found themselves talking to a most flattering listener, while Wingate devoted himself entirely to Valerie.

Delmar thought she very nearly upset everything by turning suddenly to him, but apparently including everybody in the small piece of information she gave, explaining that she and Wingate were not quite strangers.

"You know," she said, "that we got lost, or very nearly lost, together, that dreadful night when there had been such a storm here. You remember, Aunties, that I told you how kind Mr Wingate was to me?"

"I remember," said Miss Angela, "but I don't think I caught Mr Wingate's name, if you even told us, Valerie. We have to thank you, Mr Wingate, for saving our niece a nasty, cold wait in the train."

While Wingate took the opportunity of addressing himself to the ladies, Delmar made his way over to Valerie with the cake-dish.

"I am awfully pleased to make your acquaintance, Miss Drummond," he said in an undertone, replacing the cake, which she refused, on the wrong table, and sinking down on the sofa beside her.

"It seems that Kerr knew your father, long ago, and I'm almost certain that once I knew him too—at least I'm sure I did by reputation; and as Wingate is one of my oldest, indeed *the* oldest and best friend I have, and I claim all his friends as mine, I hope you

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are going to let me call myself your friend too. You know I spend the whole of the winter and a good part of the spring at Delmar, in a most unfashionable way, and a few others who are after my own heart in this respect, come down and help to liven up the place. My sisters are coming next week, even if my mother does not; I hope you will let me bring them to see you, and come over to Delmar whenever you can."

"You are very good," said Valerie, with sweet, grateful eyes raised to his. "I should love to come. Even though I have been here such a little time, several of the people round about have told me what a dear old place Delmar is; and then it is—it is so friendly and kind of you to—to—want to give me pleasure. But my aunts do not go anywhere, and I doubt if they would let me go without them."

"We must try what our combined powers of persuasion can do," he declared so cheerfully, that Valerie felt there was hope. And then he turned to Miss Angela and adroitly brought the conversation round to the subject of their orchids, which had, for years, been the talk of the county.

The ladies rose helplessly to the bait. Their thin mouths widened into positive smiles; they actually forgot Wingate and Valerie, and they instantly took possession of Delmar, and led him, a willing captive, to the orchid-house.

"So you see, I have come here at last," Wingate said, as the door closed behind Miss Angela and Delmar.

"I see you have, and Sir Grenvil with you. He is certainly a man of considerable courage, and no mean amount of tact! This last interest in their wretched orchids is a master-stroke."

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Wingate laughed.

"You have seen through him, then."

"I don't know about 'seen through.' I only know that nobody can want to be talked at about orchids. I've had them undiluted for a week, I've had to grope and grub about in their interests; and what with orchids and grey flannel for the poor, I'm hopelessly bewildered."

"You are no happier, then, here, than you were at first, than you thought you should be?" he asked.

Valerie shook her head.

"But you will come to Delmar when Grenvil asks you—you will let us try——"

"He has asked me—I think it was so kind and thoughtful of him," with a wicked little glance from under her long lashes. "Only they," and her head was jerked backwards in what he supposed to be the Misses Drummonds' direction, "will never let me go."

"Not when the house is full—not when his sisters——"

"Not if all England should be there. Besides," she added, as a sort of afterthought, "I don't know that it would be very good for me."

"Why not?"

"Well, for a time, this is my home. One gets used to almost anything, you know, and I shall use myself to this life. If I had a glimpse of any other, again, the sort of life I have lived and loved so well, it would only be harder for me here and—and—afterwards, when I go away."

"Then you are going away? You are not going to remain here always?"

"No; I am to launch out on the great sea of the world for myself, you know. The only thing that is

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standing in the way is the utter inability of my aunts to find one single thing for which I am fitted."

He was silent for a moment. It was as he had thought, then; Jack Drummond had left her dependent upon his sisters, and they were going to drive her out into the world. Perish the thought!

"Do you remember the story of the three little pigs who set out to build themselves houses?" she went on laughingly. "One had only furs with which to build, the other straw; but the last had bricks. I have no bricks—mine must be furs or straw. Have you ever built a house of straw and had it swept down? I have, and so I suppose that makes me rather dread to build another."

Whatever his answer might have been, it was checked by the sound of Miss Hermione's voice not far off.

"When shall I see you again?" he asked hastily.

"I feel certain that you will not be asked to repeat your visit of this afternoon," Valerie returned, with a touch of mischief; "and unless you are a great deal bolder than I think, you could not reasonably put in an appearance under a week."

He made a gesture of impatience. The voices were coming nearer.

"But I might take my walks by the cliff path."

"Certainly you might. It is rather out of your way, however."

"And you?"

Her eyes met his. Something deep down in them set his pulses beating quickly; it was a mingling of pleading, quite unconscious, which roused in him something more than pity, something different to pity; of sadness, of fear, that she strove to hide, that roused in him a touch of impatience; and of

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coquetry that he would far rather not have seen in them.

"Oh, I," she returned. "Well, one can never be quite sure what I shall do from one hour to the other!" And at that moment Delmar and the ladies entered.

"I don't know," said Delmar, ten minutes later, as he and Wingate were driving homeward, "that I should call this visit of ours an unqualified success. Whilst I admired the dear Miss Angela's orchids, they were very nice, but it struck me that if one ventured to admire their niece they would be anything but nice. She's delightful, and very lovely . . . the niece of course!"

"They seem to me rather impossible women," declared Wingate, who was a little out of humour with the world in general at this moment.

"Of course you told them all about having known their brother. I expected every moment that they would fall upon your neck and weep; I should have been bound to insist on Miss Valerie weeping on mine, then."

"Yes, I told them. They froze visibly."

"Perhaps they were shy. I don't believe they are in the habit of receiving men to tea in the afternoons. We shall have to wait."

He did not say for what, and Wingate spoke but little during the drive.

When they reached the Lodge, and Delmar had driven round to a side entrance, his man met him.

"Mrs Harcourt and Miss Delmar have arrived, Sir Grenvil," he said, "and Mrs Brabazon, who called about half an hour ago, is with them in the drawing-room. I have let Miss Delmar know that you have come back."

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Mrs Harcourt and Milly Delmar were Sir Grenvil's sisters. They were very evidently amused at surprising him.

"You did not expect us for another week," they declared in one breath. "Well, we changed our great minds and came on to-day."

"We found Pat in the same train, starting for the Herbertson's, and so we just made her promise to send her things on, and follow us here for tea," added Miss Delmar, well knowing that this act of hers would have won her pardon for a far greater crime than that of arriving a week before she was due at her brother's house.

"I am greatly indebted to you all," he said; and in the uncertain firelight his eyes said so much more, so much of glad surprise too great for mere words, straight into Pat Brabazon's own eyes, that a flush spread over her little delicate face, and she sunk into a seat well in the shadow, with a little movement that bade him sit near her.

"You did not let me know you were going to the Herbertson's," Delmar reproached her, very low. He leant forward, and for the shortest of moments let his hand rest on her arm that was gloved to the elbow; but his touch held a caress.

"I did not know—I thought to be far from this part of the world, and—and—like your sisters, I changed my mind."

"Why?"

"Need I tell you—must I?"

"I want you to—not here."

He rose and put her cup down; and for the benefit of the rest, who were not listening, he said something vague about a new picture and a bad light in which to see it. But he held open one

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of the doors for her, and followed her out of the room.

When they reached his favourite room, the library, she went quickly, a little nervously, over to the big fireplace and put her hand on the edge of the mantel-piece, as if a little glad of the support.

"Pat!"

He was standing by the table, with his hands stretched out to her, but she kept her eyes on the glowing fire.

"I know—I know," she said swiftly. "I was a fool to do it—I have no strength of mind, sometimes. I started away in one of my worst moods; I wired to Dolly Herbertson to expect me, and I regretted it the moment I got into the train. I might have got out at the next station, but your sisters caught me, and I was lost. Forgive me . . ."

He crossed the little space which lay between them swiftly, and stood behind her, with his hands on her shoulders.

"My dear," he said gravely, "there is no such word between you and me. Look back on your life, as I look back upon mine—or the only part of it worth remembering since we met, you and I. Look into your heart, and ask yourself if it is not you who have always been strong, brave, who have resisted, never tempted. Do you think that I, who know every look of your eyes, every tone of your dear voice, do not understand that something more than the ordinary misery has driven you here? Don't you know what it means to me—this trust of yours that is so sweet, this knowledge that you are a little happier, easier, when——"

"When you are near," she supplied, as if the truth would force its way to her lips. "It is the truth—I

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cannot hide it from you ; and if it seems to you that sometimes I try, you know it is because I want to do what is best." If she had taken one step backwards, if she had turned to face him, she knew that she would be in his arms. And so she stood still, with her foot on the fender, and her hand resting on the mantelpiece and her eyes on the fire. But she could hear his breath come quickly, and he knew that she trembled beneath the touch of his hands.

"I know," he made answer, softly. "It is why I will never go—though you urge me more than you have urged me already—where I cannot get to you at a moment's notice, where you cannot be nearer me, as to-day, at those moments when you dare not trust even yourself. But you have not told me what has happened." He took his hands from her shoulders and went a little distance from her.

"After all, does it matter?" she said, turning now to face him. "Nothing you can imagine would be worse than it is. Even the gravity of it all is lost in the repetition of vulgar—no, don't ask me now. I was beside myself yesterday, but I am calmer, more reasonable to-day. Take me back to the others. And will you tell them to call round the carriage?"

"May I take you home?"

"Not to-day."

"But I shall see you to-morrow, Pat."

"Yes; come in the morning. Dolly and I are alone till night, when Jack comes back."

He reached the door, his hand was upon the curtains over it to draw them back.

"You are in my thoughts day and night, in my heart, always," he said swiftly. "The world, these last few weeks, has been dark and colourless because I could not hope to see you or to hear your voice ;

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and in that moment, when they told me you were here, I was mad with gladness. Will you part from me once more, so soon, without a word to bring me a little comfort, that I may remember till I see you again?" And into Pat Brabazon's beautiful tender eyes, there came an expression of momentary recklessness.

"Comfort!" she echoed. "Oh, have I not already brought into your life the worst suffering it has ever held . . . ?"

"And the greatest joy; always remember that, Pat—the greatest joy!"

But she made a little movement, half impatient, half deprecatory, and went to him suddenly, and rested both her hands on his breast. And Delmar held her close to his heart for a long moment, in a clasp that had in it more of reverence than of passion, and that, while it gave her courage, yet wrung from her a little sob of despair.

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IX

A WEEK had made a great deal of difference in the life which Valerie led at Dale. Mrs Harcourt and Miss Delmar had called upon the Misses Drummond; and the Misses Drummond had actually taken tea at Delmar Lodge. More than that, they had permitted their niece to accompany them, and no one was more surprised than Valerie herself. It had been but the first step, and it had not proved nearly so difficult as she had anticipated and Wingate had feared. After this, the way bid fair to be pretty clear. Delmar's sisters took an instant liking to the girl; they made themselves extremely pleasant to the old ladies, and they followed up their pretty attentions to them by a general invitation to Valerie to come over to the Lodge as often as she could. This, however, was an invitation over which the Misses Drummond demurred, and though they did not actually refuse it, they intimated politely that their niece would not be likely to prove a very frequent visitor to Delmar.

But Valerie knew well the value of time, and while she resented her aunts' only half-spoken objections, she was wise enough to make no comment.

Mrs Harcourt had contrived to send several trivial messages during the week by Wingate, and when these had become a little difficult, she had found that there were some books which Valerie would surely like.

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To-day she had sent over a servant and a dog-cart, and a very pretty little note to Miss Hermione, asking that Valerie might spend the day at Delmar, and promising to return her safely at a reasonable hour.

Valerie saw the trap round the gloomy drive; she knew intuitively that it had been sent for her, and when her aunts summoned her, she went to them prepared for battle.

"I have had a note from Mrs Harcourt," announced Miss Hermione, smoothing the sheet of paper, and speaking with exasperating deliberation. "She wants you to go to Delmar to spend the day."

"That will be charming," interrupted Valerie at once.

"Your Aunt Angela and I do not see it quite in that light. Mrs Harcourt means it kindly, of course, but we think that, after all, it is rather mistaken kindness."

"I don't quite understand you," began Valerie, with an unconscious, haughty lifting of her chin—a little trick which did more to ruffle Miss Hermione's temper than anything.

"I should think, Valerie, that you might have seen that we never wished to cultivate the acquaintance of Sir Grenvil or his friends. We knew his mother slightly; but in those days the house was run on, I fancy, very different lines. Although I know nothing against them, and do not wish to say anything unkind, I must still endeavour to make you understand that I do not consider the society of—of—that rather flippant set very good or improving for a young person of your position."

"I don't know whether you are aware of it, Aunt Hermione, but you are addressing me much as

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though I were the under housemaid, and I may as well tell you at once that I don't like it and won't stand it . . . "

"Valerie!"

"Either allow me to accept the invitation or not; but please don't say nasty things about people who have simply tried to give me a little pleasure. When you talk about mistaken kindness, and my position, I don't quite understand you."

"I mean," returned the old lady, who was rather pale, and whose hands were shaking with real anger, "that in the near future you will have little opportunity of partaking of such so-called enjoyments as those with which the Delmar people might provide you now, and that to cultivate a taste for them can only make life harder for you later on."

Valerie resented this remark the more, because there was that truth in it which she had been telling herself all through the last week. It came to her to retort with something that would be equally annoying to her aunt.

"That is simply borrowing trouble," she declared. "One never knows what is in store for one, and my fate may be a pleasant one. I might marry, you know, and live in a good deal of luxury for the rest of my life."

Miss Hermione looked horrified.

"That is neither a pretty nor a lady-like remark," she said severely. "You may marry, certainly, but I should imagine that it will be at a distant date, and when you do, one who will be in that position of life which will presently be yours. Therefore, luxury will be quite out of the question."

"And meantime," said Valerie, with her low, musical laugh ringing through the room, "you are

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keeping Sir Grenvil's horse in the cold, while we discuss my marriage prospects!"

Miss Angela, who had not spoken yet, looked up from her account books, now.

"On second thoughts, Hermione, it might be well to accept Mrs Harcourt's invitation for Valerie to-day," she said. "It might seem a little rude to refuse, and it need not happen again."

"You had better put your hat on then, Valerie, while I send a message out to the coachman."

Valerie did not pause to make any answer; she went out of the room and up the stairs before they could change their minds and call her back.

"How they do love to fuss about nothing!" she thought, "and how insulting and vulgar they can be. I suppose they consider themselves well-bred women! I am afraid I shall one day tell them what *I* think."

And ten minutes later she had forgotten them.

The drive was a delight every inch of the way; the raw salt wind blew away the last vestige of her ill temper. Mounted in the high cart, she could see all over the country, instead of being shut up in a rumbling old landau behind a couple of horses that tried to outdo one another in going at a snail's pace. Her cheeks gained colour and her eyes brightened. She was so young, and care was so easily cast aside. This day was hers at least, come what might afterwards. She would be happy now. She would forget everything but the present; the past and the future should have no place in her heart to-day.

And while she was being driven behind one of Delmar's swiftest horses, to the quaintly beautiful house which she had seen but once, and longed to see again, her aunts were discussing Mrs Harcourt's invitation.

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"You had some reason, Angela, for letting Valerie go?"

"I don't know that it was exactly a reason. I thought it better to let her go to Delmar than to put up with her in a disagreeable mood for the rest of the week. Upon acquaintance, Valerie does not improve. She is not the sort of girl with whom we could live very long. I never thought she would be—and now that she had been made such a senseless fuss over by Mrs Harcourt, you can see for yourself that she is growing independent. You heard that remark about her possible marriage! She really is possessed of maidenly reserve. There must be no further hesitation, Hermione, we must get her some employment at once. On our recommendation, and if she is not seen first, she may be engaged. After that we wash our hands of her. We shall have done our duty, and we shall have given her the start. She must do the rest herself."

Miss Hermione agreed with every word her sister had uttered, and she showed that she did so by a series of energetic nods. She went on to discuss Delmar's sisters, with whom she could find no fault save that Mrs Harcourt's manner was too flippant for a woman married and a woman of her age, and that Miss Delmar dressed in a far too youthful style. In speaking of them, these ladies mimicked their style of speech and the tones of their voices, in the half sarcastic, half playful way they had of talking over most of their friends. There were times when they even poked fun at each other in this way, so strong was the habit upon them, behind each other's backs.

And then Miss Hermione sent to the station for certain newspapers which had never yet found their

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way into Dale, and promised herself an enjoyable afternoon sifting through the advertisements.

Meantime Valerie was spending her afternoon seated before a huge fire in the lounge-room at Delmar, her little feet on the fender bar, her sunny head pressed back on a pillow that took up half her chair, and her eyes on Mrs Harcourt's merry little face.

"You look as though you were thoroughly enjoying yourself," that lady declared.

"And I am. I'm afraid I am never quite so happy as when I am doing nothing."

"Except walking," put in Wingate, who was not far off. "I was going to suggest taking you to fetch Pat, if she is not here within the next ten minutes."

But Valerie nestled more closely among her cushions and shook her head at him.

"Tell me," she said, addressing Mrs Harcourt, "who is 'Pat'? I hear you speak of her—you do it as if you all loved her—you too," nodding at Wingate.

"I'm inclined to think that we all do," averred Mrs Harcourt, playing with an impossible bit of knitting. "So you have not met her yet? Well, you will presently, and then you'll agree that there is something about Pat that is extremely lovable."

"Is she Sir Grenvil's wife," Valerie asked idly, and looked round quickly, because an appalled sort of silence fell upon her hearers.

"Eh? Good gracious, no! My dear child! didn't you know that Gren isn't married?"

"Well, I didn't *know* it. I never heard anyone say he was or he wasn't; and the fact that she was not here last time I came, did not convey much. People aren't always where their wives are—are they?"

"They are not, indeed!" agreed Mrs Harcourt

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who was evidently intensely amused. "Generally they are almost anywhere else."

"But about this 'Pat'; I am interested in her, you see. It must be awfully nice to have everybody so fond of one," wistfully.

"You say that almost enviously."

"I feel it like that."

"Yet it is not possible that you would have us believe that everybody is not fond of you," said Wingate. He had come to that side of the fireplace where her chair stood, and now looked down at her in an endeavour to meet her eyes, which she obstinately and tantalisingly kept turned from him.

"It is true, all the same."

"Well, Pat's is a rather sad story," Mrs Harcourt interposed. "Everybody knows it, so I don't see why you should not. Some years ago her people, who were intensely poor, and more intensely selfish, literally forced her into a marriage with a man who had nothing else to recommend him but a very excellent fortune. She was sold to him, simply sold, and he really was, I think, the most abominable outsider I ever did meet. Kerr thinks I ought not to be telling you these things," she added, lowering her soft voice to quite a whisper, and jerking her head in the direction of the farthest window at the other end of the enormous room, over to which Wingate had walked. "He's quite the dearest thing that ever was born, the most delightfully unspoiled man in all the world; but he hangs on to one or two old-fashioned notions about women, that cause him the most grisly shocks at times. Poor Pat had a terrible life of it; she has still, for her precious husband has grown worse instead of better. Only she is so terribly—conscientious—you know what I mean; she has her

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fixed ideas about what is right and what is wrong, and she'll go straight, will Pat, to the end of the chapter, to the last day of her life. Her husband knows it—everybody knows it, though he and lots of others pretend not to."

"And she is very unhappy, then?"

"I won't say that. When one knows how to live at all, if one isn't quite a fool, one is never really unhappy. Use is a good deal, you know, and Pat does not do the silly things for herself that she did years ago. She and he meet as rarely as possible, and when they do, they agree to be fairly amiable to each other. He goes his way, drinks and gambles, and behaves generally like the disreputable sinner that he is, and causes his own people no end of trouble, as he always has from his school days. He has disgraced his name so that his father is ashamed of it, and yet he comes of the best blood in England—his mother was a saint, his father a good man and a gentleman to the core. He's one of the Cuthbert Brabazons of——"

"Here is Pat," remarked Wingate from his window, and Mrs Harcourt said "Bravo!"

But Valerie's feet had slipped helplessly off the fender-bar, her head pressed limply on to the cushion behind it, and for a moment every article of furniture in the room seemed to rise up to strike her. Instinctively she put her hand before her face that she knew was livid, while a little murmur of thankfulness went up from her heart with a prayer for strength as Mrs Harcourt rose and crossed the room. Valerie got out of her chair in time to see Wingate coming towards her, and to be introduced to Pat.

"Sir Grenvil told me you were here, and so I hurried all I knew," declared that little lady, with

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flattering emphasis. "Last time, you disappeared just as I arrived."

Then, all at once, her soft eyes grew wide, her fingers closed on Valerie's in a grip that was painful, and all the sweet rose-colour died out of her cheeks. But in a moment she had recovered herself with all her natural grace, recovered so swiftly and easily that none but Valerie's miserable eyes had detected her surprise—horrificed surprise. Pat dropped the cold, limp hand; a little laugh, devoid, perhaps, of its usual sweetness, escaped her; and she turned sharply away, blessing the semi-darkness of this corner.

"Am I to be forgotten," asked Wingate, whose eyes had been resting a little uneasily on Valerie.

It was plain that she was making a great effort even to answer Pat. Her smile was not that bright, sweet one of the eyes as well as of the mouth, that had haunted him so persistently since he had first seen her.

"Fancy forgetting you!" Pat said, while she gave him both her hands and let him take her furs. "Did I hear anyone say 'tea'?" insinuatingly, and with new haste, for her. "Miss Drummond," turning to speak deliberately to Valerie again, "do come and tell me things, while Kerr wakes the servants up. And don't look like that," she added in a sharp whisper, pulling the girl close down to her side, while the words she uttered reached only her ear, scarcely breathed as they were. "You are white as paper—everyone will notice in a moment! Pull yourself together; you need not fear me. I am not a cad—too!"

Pat spoke abruptly, sharply, but there was no un-
ness in her eyes, not even a trace of anger in the

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low, beautiful voice; and Valerie looked back at her in speechless wonder, with a half sad, half hunted look in her eyes, that brought the tears to Pat's own.

Half an hour passed—half an hour of the most exquisite torture for both Valerie and Pat, half an hour in which they both seemed to live over again a painful lifetime. Then, with a little characteristic, determined movement, Mrs Brabazon rose, and brought about their release. She contrived to take Wingate aside.

"I don't think she is well," she said quietly.

"She? Who? Miss Drummond?"

"Yes; or is it shyness?"

"She is not shy."

"Then, as I say, she is not well. Take her away from the rest for a little while, Kerr."

Wingate smiled.

"What makes you select me . . ." he began, with curiosity. And Mrs Brabazon narrowed her pretty dark eyes, and put her head a little on one side.

"Shall we say instinct? Dear old boy, have you been my best and kindest friend for nine years to leave it impossible for me to read your mind—sometimes? Take her away, now."

Wingate, nothing loth, went back to Valerie's side. It was some few moments before he managed to get her away from the rest, but he did manage it at last. And as he followed her, presently, from the room, Mrs Brabazon detained her a moment at the door.

"They keep this room a trifle too hot with the pipes," she said easily, "don't you think? Are you staying about here very long?"

"No, I think not—not—long," murmured Valerie, forcing a smile.

She was glad when Mrs Brabazon's voice ceased,

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when the lounge-room was left far behind, when, presently, she felt a breath of air on her forehead, that seemed to bring her out of a stupor.

"Can I go out in the gardens? Will it matter? Will you take me?" she asked breathlessly; and Wingate caught up a shawl that lay in the hall, and put it round her. Then he threw wide a door at the side of the house, and led her in silence through the bare gardens, over their carpet of moist brown leaves.

"What is the matter?" he asked her at last. "You are ill, or something has happened. What is it?"

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IT is nothing," she said faintly, "I—I—believe I have had a headache all day—the wind, you know, coming over was rather keen——"
"And it is blowing on you now."

"Yes, but I like it now—it does me good."

"But is that all?" he persisted. "You are sure nothing has upset you? It was nothing that Mrs Harcourt was telling you? She is a dear soul, but she does colour her friends' life-stories rather highly at times. She surely did not treat you to any of the miserable details of Pat's unhappy lot."

"No—no. I was interested to hear about her, poor woman. It—it—is unfortunate, isn't it?" in a wild endeavour to take his attention a little away from herself. "You—do you know—him?"

"Who? Brabazon? I regret to say I do. Don't let us talk of him. I hate to hear his name on your lips. If you see much of Pat, the chances are you may have to meet him, but I trust the time is far off. The most objectionable cad on the face of the earth—a man I cannot understand any decent woman speaking to a second time—a man I should like to have an excuse for soundly thrashing."

He was conscious of having been betrayed into

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speaking strongly by his ever-present anger against the husband of Mrs Brabazon, because he *was* her husband, and of a little harsh laugh which escaped Valerie.

It was a long time before she could see anything but a sky that seemed to be falling down upon her, trees that were foolishly bowing before her to the ground, a mist that would not clear before her eyes. Wingate's voice sounded miles away, but every word cruelly distinct—words she would never be able to forget. For the first time she would have welcomed the sight of Dale; even one or both of her aunts; she would have blessed Upton if he had only appeared at this moment to take her away. It came to her presently that her silence had lasted long—so long that Wingate might be wondering at it.

"It is not likely that I shall see much of anybody here," she forced herself to say. "I shall be going away very soon" (in her heart she was determining that it should be on the morrow if possible), "and it will be to quite another world. Which reminds me," with a little wan smile, "it must be nearly six—and the drive home is a long one—and I promised that I would not be late."

"You are in a great hurry to leave us, Miss Drummond."

There was coldness in his voice that already sent a chill of dread to her heart. She told herself that it would be the coldness of his worst contempt if he knew all. This was the day which she had determined should be such a happy one! She wished with all her soul that her aunts had kept to their original intention and had desired her to remain at home. And then a little touch of

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something like the old recklessness came upon her, of something like the old courage. She lifted her eyes to his in the misty dusk, through which he could hardly see her face; she put out a little pleading hand and touched his arm.

"Don't be unkind to me," she entreated. "I am not anxious to leave—any of you. You have all been kinder to me than anyone has been, oh! for months and months. But—I had not wanted to confess it—I think I am not very well; and I don't fancy I shall have the strength to battle with their anger to-night, so I had better not incur it. That is what is called prudence, Mr Wingate."

"I understand," he said, taking one of her cold hands and keeping it in a firm clasp. "They do not like you to come here—they do not like anyone from here to go to Dale. You told me once that I was persistent. I hope my persistence has not been the cause of annoyance to you."

She was silent. She was thinking that there was only one course clear to her, and that it would be best to steer for it at the outset.

"It sounds so ungrateful," she almost whispered, because she was conscious that her words were at best that worse thing than a lie—half a truth. "Ungrateful to them and to you—to them because I owe them much, to you and Sir Grenvil, and Mrs Harcourt, oh! and all here, because you have meant to be only kind. But—but—if this is really your wish, you and your friends—all—will forget that you ever met me. Oh," miserably, "don't you understand, a little?"

He thought he did. He said something uncomplimentary to the absent Misses Drummond

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under his breath; and he kept her hand still in his.

"Are you telling me that you will not come here any more?"

"I am certain my aunts will refuse to allow it. I am like a child or a prisoner in their house, and——"

"It is monstrous! And do you mean that even if you do not come here, I—you wish that I shall forget that we ever met?"

"It might—it would be best."

"Then I decline to entertain such a monstrous idea for a moment. Miss Drummond may shut her door in my face, you may not set foot in this place again; but you are not quite a prisoner yet, and," with a short laugh, "I am very sure we shall meet again, and often. Now let me take you back to the house and tell them to send round—you must have a closed carriage to-night."

She answered him nothing. There seemed so little that she could say with any safety. The day, her whole life was a failure. She had thought she would escape even memory; she had not known that at every turn the way would become more difficult. The man who walked silently by her side now was perhaps the one creature whose good opinion she would have had; and she felt that she dared not look him in the face, lest he should read all too clearly what was in her heart.

He smoothed the way for her departure with ease and much tact; so that no surprise was felt and no questions were asked when she came down to say good-bye.

They all declared that she was behaving shabbily in going so soon, but Mrs Harcourt remembered

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her promise to Miss Hermione. Wingate, alone, went with her to the door.

"I am not going to say good-bye," he declared softly. "You go for your favourite walk on the cliffs every day I am sure—you spend half your time there; and if I too wander——"

"What you are saying is almost equal to asking me to meet you," she said gravely, but glad that she could command her voice.

"Well, then, I do. We are not utter strangers . . ."

"Oh, I know! We met twenty years ago—and you knew father . . ."

"Exactly. I am sure that you should not prowl over those lonely ways by yourself; so what harm if I ask you to let me prowl too?"

"But how can I prevent you?" she said, weakly.

And then Mrs Brabazon appeared suddenly.

"I am going right past Dale, on an errand for Mrs Herbertson," she said, with her expressive eyes on Valerie. "Won't you let Kerr send back the carriage, and let me drive you? I should like your company, Miss Drummond."

Wingate, who was pleased that Pat had evidently taken a liking to Valerie, gave the order almost before the girl could answer. And while she murmured something polite and pleasant to Pat, the Herbertson brougham came to the door, a smart little electric affair, which, a moment later, was out of sight.

Mrs Harcourt's uplifted eyebrows asked questions of Wingate as he came back into the hall.

"I don't think she is well," he explained a little shortly. "Added to that, her aunts evidently made a scene about her coming here at all to-day. I think she has been brooding over another that is

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in store for her on her return, and she is not very happy."

Mrs Harcourt looked at him hard for a moment; then she made a little grimace.

"What cats!" she said.

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XI

THE brougham in which Pat and Valerie were seated had been gliding swiftly and softly over the ground for several minutes before a word was spoken between the women. It was Mrs Brabazon who broke the miserable silence.

"I am not going past Dale; that was an invention of mine. But I can send you on there presently. There will be no one at the house where I am staying until to-night: I want to talk to you—will you come back with me for a little while?" Valerie assented, with a movement of her head like one in a dream; and Mrs Brabazon leant out of the window to give an order.

"You had heard of me? You knew I should be here, when you came to Delmar to-day?" she inquired, looking curiously at the girl.

"I—I—had not. I had never heard you spoken of save as 'Pat.' Mrs Harcourt was—was—speaking of you only a few moments before you came into the room, and she had just explained to me that you were the wife of Cuthbert Brabazon. But you knew me! I saw by your eyes—there was recognition in them—that you knew me! How was that; oh, how was it possible."

"Have you not yet learned that this is a very small world indeed? I have seen you twice in my life; each time you were pointed out to me in company with my husband. Certainly Delmar was

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the very last place at which I ever expected to see you for the third time."

Valerie's face, that had been momentarily flushed with hot colour, grew so deadly white that Mrs Brabazon thought she was going to faint. She put out a quick, sympathetic hand, but the girl cowered away into her corner, and let her face sink down into the fur of her muff. "Had you not thought, feared," went on Pat, "that you might meet me, or even—him, there? Or was it that you did not care? Don't tell me it was that—I can't believe it! If I had never seen you before, if I had not recognised you, I should have looked into your face and told myself that beside your beauty you possessed truth and . . ."

"Do not!" broke in Valerie, in a little wail of misery. "You don't understand, you can't. Even when I have told you, you may refuse to believe me. But for God's sake don't speak gently to me. Be harsh, be cruel—turn upon me and say to me what I deserve to hear, and you know I dare not resent. So, my heart will harden, and so, I can bear it best—but . . ."

"Hush—hush! Listen, we have nearly arrived. Don't say another word till we are in the house."

Valerie obeyed. In a moment she was following Mrs Brabazon through the warm hall, and up a wide flight of stairs. Presently they entered one of a cosy suite of rooms; and Pat, when she had drawn forward a chair for Valerie, turned to the maid who came to take her furs.

"No, not the lights yet, Ellis. Just stir the fire, and we don't want tea. I'll ring if I want you, don't be disturbed."

Pat waited till the maid had gone, and then she laid a gentle hand on Valerie's shoulder.

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"Don't tell me it was that you did not care," she said again, as though half fearing the answer.

"No, it was not—I——"

"I'm glad of that, I felt sure of it. My dear, you bade me not speak gently, you said you wanted to harden your heart; but I am not your judge, and knowing what I know of the man whose victim you have been made, I know that already your heart must be hardened enough. Come, tell me what you said just now you feared I might refuse to believe—I shall not; I shall know you are speaking truth."

Valerie looked up into the lovely little pitiful face incredulously.

"You make it a great deal more easy for me," she said gratefully. "To be believed is everything. First, then, will you believe that until that last hour in which your—Mr Brabazon and I met for the last time, and parted for always, I had never heard of your existence; I had no suspicion, no slightest reason for the suspicion that there—that he—had a wife. Oh, will you believe that?"

"Yes."

"You mean it? After all you must have heard of me—after?"

"I have scarcely heard anything of you," declared Pat; "I have never heard your name till I heard it at Delmar. You were not an object of interest to me; I was not even curious about you. You were pointed out to me at a time when there were—those anxious that I should take divorce proceedings against my husband. The information that was forced upon me then, is all I ever had, and if I heard your name I forgot it the next moment. You do not belong to the class of women with whom his name is usually associated—you are so young, and it is a year or more

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ago since I first saw you. Tell me what is it that brings you here; how came you at Delmar?"

"You heard perhaps that I am living now with my aunts at Dale?"

"Yes, and that your father, who died recently, was John Drummond the artist."

"My aunts are his sisters," returned Valerie, in a voice that was quite passionless. "When father died I was left alone and penniless. Of my—my—fren—acquaintance with—Mr Brabazon he was ever in ignorance. Now, I can thank God that he did not live to know the truth. At his death, and not till then, I—oh, I was alone, there was no one else in the world, no one to whom—to whom—I thought I had a right to go but—but—him. I had believed in and trusted him, fool that I was! There must have been a time when—I—cared. I went to him, I tell you—and then it was that I heard of—you. My whole thought then was to escape from the world that had been mine and his; my one desire to hide myself away where I might never meet any I had known or who had known me. And then my aunts offered me their home till such time as I could find employment, and I jumped at the offer because their world had ever been as far apart from my father's as the Poles. Through an accident I met Mr Wingate; through him I met Sir Grenvil Delmar, who has been so kind to me. I heard of you only as Pat—how should I have dreamed that you were—his wife? I thought I had left all the past behind, I had taken the path which was to lead to a new life entirely, and—and—now you see what has happened."

"My dear child, we never leave the past entirely behind, do what we will. There is something out of it that will always crop up for our discomfiture,

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It is difficult to tell you what I feel about you, but you may believe that it is all pity that is in my heart. There are no others who could understand so well as I, and that comprehension makes me see with different eyes to those with which the world would see—the world that is always so ready to condemn. You see,” and Pat’s low voice was half grim, half disgusted, wholly quaint, “no one else has had the misfortune to be his wife. I wish,” suddenly, “you were not so young, I wish you were someone quite different—the sort of woman one might shrug one’s shoulders about and forget in half an hour. But you’re not. The thought of you will haunt me. You tell me that all the future holds for you is the promise of the drudgery of a governess’ or companion’s life. And I know that it will never work. No one will want you; women with any sense, and sons, run away from such beauty as you possess as from the plague. And I’m thinking, with no one to hold out a helping hand to you, you may get reckless in the long run, you may look back upon the early ruin of your life and tell yourself that the rest does not matter much.”

“And you can trouble to think even so much for me?” asked Valerie, forgetting her misery in her utter surprise.

Pat gave a quaint little shrug of the shoulders.

“Why not?” she said. “God forbid that I should sit in judgment on you or any; and you never harmed me.”

“Oh, not knowingly, not——”

“Not knowingly, or unknowingly.”

“I do not deserve pity, and for me there is no excuse,” said Valerie, getting up from her chair and walking to and fro. “The more I look back upon

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the past, the more I see that the blame lies all at my door. All my life was one of freedom; I was a woman of the world almost before other girls are out of the nursery. I learned much; but one thing I never learned—and that was doubt, mistrust. No one in all my life had ever cheated me; I had never need to lie, and so the truth came easily. As I have told you, I kept my acquaintance with Mr Brabazon a secret—by his express wish—from my father, but I did not lie to him about it." Then she came nearer to Mrs Brabazon.

"You have been very good to me," she said softly. "I cannot be sorry that I have met you. But there is still one kindness that you can show me if you will."

"And that?"

"Is to forget me—this day—utterly. I was going to leave here soon, now it shall be at once. Will you wipe out from your memory these last two hours?"

"You mean that you want me never to say anything of what I know to anyone? You need hardly fear."

"You mistake me," returned Valerie flushing. "I meant that—that—I want to be quite forgotten by you and all—all—your friends. And now, as you promised to send me home, I will say good-bye. Though I have asked you to forget me, I think I shall never quite forget you."

She did not hold out her hand, and when Pat had rung the bell and given an order about the carriage, she moved to the door.

Pat ran after her. "You're not going to do anything foolish!" she said. "You'll—you'll—oh you won't go coasting down-hill just because you think all the world is against you? It isn't. There is scarcely anything you can't live down—it is

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not impossible to retrieve a false step—always. After we met at Delmar, when I recognised you and you saw that I did, I thought it best that we should have this talk ; but if it has seemed to make things harder for you than ever—I shall never forgive myself.”

“No,” returned Valerie, and the heavy tears were in her eyes now. “If that were possible, I think the way may seem a little easier.” And then, impulsively, she stretched out her hand, and Mrs Brabazon held it closely for a long minute.

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XII

VALERIE DRUMMOND had scarcely left the house when Grenvil Delmar turned in at the lodge gates. He looked after the disappearing brougham with some curiosity, but he did not pause on his way. Five minutes later he heard the soft rustle of Pat's skirts as she came down the stairs and then to him in the small drawing-room.

Her eyebrows were uplifted, and her smile was soft; but there was a touch of absence in the way she gave him her hands that set him wondering.

"Why did you leave Delmar so early?" he asked her. "You knew that I could not get back before; and when I'd raced home like mad, it was to find you had already left, with Miss Drummond. Was it she who drove by me just now, out of these gates?"

"Poor boy!" said Pat, stirring her fingers gently in his, but still keeping the little frown on her forehead. "Yes, it was Miss Drummond. I'm sorry I could not wait; but I knew . . ."

"Look here, Pat," said Delmar anxiously, "there's something on your mind, something you're worried about. I don't believe," giving her the gentlest of little shakes, "that you know I am here at all."

At this she laughed, and, for half a second, leant her soft cheek against his arm. Then she took to pacing up and down the room several times, and finally threw herself into a big chair.

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"There is. I am worried," she declared, looking up at Delmar. "I may as well own it to you, because you would be sure to find me out anyway. Oh, Gren," getting up suddenly, and resting both her little hands on his arm, "I meant that no one should ever hear. Even from you I was wondering if I should keep it a secret; and just as I was thinking so, they came up to tell me you were here."

"You admit that something is troubling you, and that still you would leave me in ignorance?" he answered, with surprise and no little reproach.

"Oh, that was just the thought for the moment. I don't suppose it would have held good for long. Gren," looking round to see that the doors were securely closed; "it is about Miss Drummond."

"Miss Drummond? Why, what on earth has happened to concern you about her? Pat, what do you mean? Explain."

"It is not easy. It is—oh, whom do you think she really is? You'd never believe it—never think it possible! And I—oh, I hate to think of it. I hate to break through my rule of never speaking—his—name to—you."

Delmar paled a little beneath his healthy bronze. He knew she was going to speak of her husband, and he made no attempt to interrupt her.

"You remember that time, a little more than a year ago, when the people from Mr Chester came to me, and—and——"

"You mean when you might have had your freedom without an instant's trouble; when all the world, even your own mother, who, God forgive her, brought all the misery into your life, blamed you that you would not take it," returned Delmar hotly.

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"Yes; then. Well, you remember that a certain woman was pointed out to me. I heeded very little, and I don't think I ever heard her name. That woman I recognised to-day in—in Miss Drummond."

"Good God!"

The two words dropped slowly, in absolute horror, from Delmar's lips; and he was silent for a full minute afterwards, incapable of uttering another sound.

"You're not mistaken—you're sure you are not wrong?" he said at last.

"No, I'm not mistaken. I wish with all my heart and soul that I might be. But I recognised her instantly—she saw that I did; and I brought her here with me from Delmar just now; and oh! Gren, it is all true. It is over—everything is ended—between them now. It is not hard to understand that he deserted her, cast her aside, when at her father's death she turned to him as to the only soul on earth to whom she could turn."

"No, it is not. But it is harder to understand that you can speak of her as though she had your pity."

"And so she has. Only think for a moment—only remember her as she has seemed to you through the little time that you have known her, and you will pity her too."

"I don't know," said Delmar, with less justice than he generally displayed. "I must admit that she is a most charmingly beautiful woman, but she does not impress me as one who was ever among the sweet simple innocents; and I confess that I cannot help thinking she has entered her aunts' and my house under false pretences."

The moment the words had escaped him he felt

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a certain shame at them, and with Pat's sweet eyes upon him that shame increased.

"Don't mistake me," he added quickly, "I don't mean to be hard on the girl, on any woman; but in the circumstances . . ."

"In the circumstances you can hardly be a fair judge," interrupted Pat, "and I can hardly expect it. The mere knowledge that this poor child is one of *his* victims prejudices you against *her*. I don't suppose that there is a man living, worth the name, who could help a feeling of contempt coming uppermost for the woman who could be deceived and cheated by such a man as Cuthbert Brabazon. But I am a woman, and, worse still, I am his wife; and though there never was a moment in my life when I could even tolerate him, though what might only have been indifference was turned to loathing when I was driven into marriage with him, I was forced for a short time to spend all my life with him, and I realised then that there might be women in the world—nay, that there were many of them—for whom he held some attraction that was inexplicable to me. Why are you hard on her, whom he cheated and ruined? Don't you think that the greater contempt is due to the woman who could have become his wife?"

"Pat!"

Delmar had seized her hands, and had drawn her nearer to him with a half protecting, half angry movement.

"Ah," she said softly, "you love me, and your heart is filled with hatred for those who have wronged me. You love me, and you would wash your memory clear of all those who have shared even a portion of my past. You love me, and you cannot

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be even just to one who has caused me a moment's pain. I can understand it—it is so sweet, all the comfort I have in life to know it—but I would have your lenience this once, because I want your help."

"My help! When you know that all my life is at your service."

She wound her fingers closely round his. Perhaps she knew that with their soft touch she might lead him whither she would.

"Look you," she said, "that girl's life may be made or marred from this hour. Promise me you won't help to mar it."

"Good heavens! Why should I seek to injure her? It is nothing to me if I never set eyes upon her again."

"No, but it will be something to you if Kerr marries her. Ah, you see what I am thinking! The blindest person in all the world could see at once that he is in love with her; and with Kerr, to love once is to love always."

"By Jove! I'd forgotten that! I know that he is very much attracted. I believe, with you, that he cares. Pat, you can't mean that you want him left in ignorance."

"I do. Would you have anyone come to you and whisper so much as a word against me?"

"Don't," he pleaded hoarsely. "How dare you bracket yourself with . . ."

"Dear, you set me on a pedestal. But in the world's eyes I am just a woman who made a marriage of convenience with her eyes open, who goes her way while her husband goes his, and who is in love with another man. There are plenty who open their doors to me and kiss me on both cheeks, because they dare not do anything else; but in

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their secret hearts I don't expect they rate me very highly. More than that, they would never understand, or want to believe that there never has been, and never will be, a touch of wrong and shame in the love we bear to each other. I, in a measure, am protected, even in the bearing of the disgraced name which is mine, but that girl is utterly alone. I would stake my life that her heart is true and her instincts are pure. If her chances are taken from her at the outset, who shall say whither she may drift?"

"She may count herself in luck, at all events," Delmar said, with a half jealous ring in his nice voice, "to have gained such a champion, such a special pleader as yourself."

But Pat made a little, half impatient gesture.

"I might never have heard of her; but as things have turned out," she returned, "it is a case that seems to go right home to my heart. If she had been any other woman I should not have cared, but as it is, I can't forget her, or cease to pity her. Oh, and more than that, I cannot help envying her."

"Envy her! You?"

"Yes; is she not at least free? Has he not divided his life from hers for all time? And I, till that hour when he dies or I die, am bound to him by ties that nothing can break."

"Because you will not let them be broken," he answered swiftly. "Pat! it rests with you—all with you. My dear, what is the world to us? What is its opinion? Need we care how it talks and how it wonders? Will you live out this life of yours that at best is but half life, and doom me to the miserable existence that is mine now, for ever? Pat, think!"

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"And have I not thought, have I not gone over it all till madness has seemed to stare me in the face! It is not my duty as a wife that holds me back—he has no claim on that. It is not my honour as a woman—I know you are dearer far to me than even that. It is little for a woman to give her life up to love, but it is much to a man—most often, ruin. Do you think I don't understand the sweetness, the truth, the loyalty of your nature? Do you think I don't know that the greater the world's scorn for me, the more binding you would hold my claim upon you? For you I would bear worse than death, but not even for you will I bring grief upon your mother, will I force your sisters to turn aside from you, and their children to be taught that they may not speak your name."

The hot tears forced their way beneath her eyelids, and ran slowly down her cheeks. But Delmar was silent. Long ago he had used and exhausted every argument; long ago he had pleaded and put forth every prayer. Now he only bent over the little trembling hands, and drew them close to his lips.

"We have somehow got round to personal interests," he said, and his voice gave indication of great self-repression. "You were speaking of Kerr, and the possibility of his——"

"The certainty of his love for—for Valerie Drummond."

"And do you think he will thank us in the long run? Do you think he will be grateful if we let him link his life to one that he now holds pure and blameless, knowing what we know? God forbid that I should interfere between him and the woman he cares for, or that I should deem myself fit to sit in judgment upon her; but if he should discover the

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truth, *when* he discovers it, as he surely will when it is too late, what do you think he will have to say to us?"

"If he loves her, will anything matter? If you knew me to be the vilest criminal on earth, to-morrow, would it make you turn from me?"

"No; but—you know him as well as I—I have a fancy that—that this is the sort of thing he would never forgive, even in love. He is not a man to love lightly, or more than once. The affection he gives to a woman will only be given to the woman he will worship as his wife and the mother of his children. And it will be an affection that has never been wasted, that in all its rich treasure of perfect faith and purity has waited to be lavished on one worthy of it. I could wish that this secret of the girl's life had never been made known to us, dear, or that——"

"Oh, and I wish it too. But since it is known to us, can we not help her rather than cast her down."

"May you not be distressing yourself needlessly?" Delmar interposed. "May it not be that she will refuse to accept his love, at least without telling him the truth? I almost believe that if a woman for whom Kerr cared had the courage to be truthful, he would forgive her."

"I had not quite thought of that," admitted Pat, but still a little restlessly. "I think she is the sort of girl who would be above that sort of deception. And yet, when one cares—and with one's own hand one may stretch out and gather joy or sign one's own death warrant—it is hard to say what hold temptation might have. She begged me to forget her utterly, and this day, and said that she wished all my friends to forget her. Perhaps she may have been thinking of Kerr. And she said, too, that she

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would go away from here at once. Poor child, she had come here thinking to escape all the past, everyone from her old world—or his! It seems a cruel fate that threw her first of all across the path of possible happiness, and then brought her face to face with me."

"Is not life one long cruelty?" Delmar asked, with intense bitterness.

He threw his arms wide for a moment, and then let his hands come down lightly, fondly, on her shoulders.

"Shall we, with regard to this—regrettable affair, make up our minds to say 'sufficient unto the day, etc.'? For one, I shall say nothing to Kerr till he seems to me to be in danger of taking a step he may regret; and then I shall not speak without first consulting you. And now," with a long sigh, "I must go. Say good-bye to me, Pat."

"Good-bye," she returned softly, and for one short moment framed his face with both her hands. But she did not go nearer to him or lift her face to his. She was, after all, but a woman, and, more than that, a woman who loved him; and all her soul cried out for the tenderness that answered hers, all her heart hungered for the warmth of his kisses, for the fond words that were clamouring for utterance on his lips. But she never tempted him; it was always she who was strong, she who could guide him with a word or a glance. And presently she stood in the softly-lighted hall, watching him down the drive, and keeping back the tears that would have filled a small, attentive page with wonder and perhaps amusement.

XIII

VALERIE spent the rest of the evening in secret misery, and more than half the night awake. Peace of mind was gone; sleep was banished. The knowledge brought to her by her visit to Delmar, by her interview with Pat Brabazon, had gone home to her heart and mind with a force that, for a long time, robbed her of the power to decide how much it might really mean to her.

She had reached home in fairly good time; and she sat through the semi-silent dinner—to which she generally looked forward, principally because it killed one of the long evening hours—conscious of being very quiet, indeed absent; conscious of her aunts' half-inquiring, half-wondering glances, and also of a desire to escape to her own rooms. She wanted to be alone and to think; but she had to answer questions about her visit, and to watch Upton crawling round the table and squeezing two lemons into two glasses of water; and to sip water herself, without lemon, from her own glass, because her mouth was parched and dry, while she tried not to make a wry face, or to let her mind wander irresistibly to that part of her toilette when she cleaned her teeth.

Afterwards she had to wind some wool in the drawing-room, and to make up some accounts—

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quite inaccurately—and to sip tea. Then she heard about some village person's rheumatism, and someone else's twins, and a great deal about the wife of the doctor, who was getting up a religious concert in aid of some society, the name of which Valerie did not hear, because her thoughts were far away. And finally she followed her aunts into the cold morning-room, where Miss Hermione read prayers to the servants, who were only a little less interested than Valerie herself.

After that she took up her flat candlestick, with impatience that sputtered the grease, and brought forth a mild reprimand from Miss Angela, who, for ten minutes after prayers, always kept her smile soft and serene, and her voice hushed.

And upon the stroke of half-past ten, freedom!—her own rooms—and all the hours till another morning broke, to lie wide awake, to battle with memory and fresh misery.

Again Valerie could see Mrs Harcourt's merry eyes grow angry or sad as she gave the history of Pat Brabazon's life. Again she could see Wingate walking over to the distant window. Again she could feel the awful sensation of faintness that had almost overcome her. And again her eyes seemed to meet those of Brabazon's wife, her hands to feel the little friendly, pitiful touch of Pat's soft fingers, her ears to listen to the sweet voice, the words that Valerie could scarcely yet believe had been uttered by Brabazon's wife. The mere memory was horrible; it brought the hot colour to her cheeks, here in the darkness. But there was another memory which was simple torture; it was that of her escape from the room with Wingate, and her short conversation with him in the dim gardens. That brought no

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colour to her face—it sent a chill of cold straight to her heart, it seemed to tell her that all her life from this day must be one long, lasting regret. Every word he had spoken haunted her, most of all these: “Do not let us talk of Brabazon. I hate even to hear his name on your lips, . . . an objectionable cad, to whom I cannot understand any decent woman speaking a second time.” She turned her face upon her pillows and writhed again in an agony of misery and shame, and bitter, futile regret. And yet, even out of hateful, disturbing thoughts, there came back to her the pleasant memory of the kindly tones of his nice voice, the keen yet gentle glance of his eyes, the irresistible attraction which lay in his whole manner, that somehow gave one confidence, that brought with it an odd, indefinable sense of safety.

In the long watches of the night one can always see troubles through the deepest of deep blue glasses; Valerie saw breakers ahead that threatened to sweep her off her feet. She must get away from Dale somehow; she must bestir herself about getting employment. To have met Brabazon’s wife was bad enough; to run the risk of meeting him was not to be thought of for a moment. There was no safety for her here. All that was left to her was to get away from Dale with all possible speed.

Her aunts had promised her their assistance, and she would keep them up to their promise. She had some idea that what they called “lady-like” employment would be something very disagreeable; but in her present state of mind she did not care much, so that they found it for her where she would be most unlikely to set eyes upon anyone belonging to the old happy days. Yes, they were happy; she could

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not deny that. Though she might have to pay dearly for some of them, she had known much more joy than sorrow in them. She watched the flickering shadows cast by the night-light on the ceiling till her eyes grew heavy; she made all sorts of plans, only to unmake them the next moment; and, finally, she dropped into a dull, unrefreshing sleep that was filled with restless dreams, her last clear thought being that, first, she must avoid the cliff path, and next that she would take the first step towards leaving Dale on the morrow.

The thought that had taken possession of Valerie as she fell into her restless sleep took possession of her afresh as she awoke in the morning.

She gave utterance to it when she was seated at the breakfast table; when Miss Angela was looking sharper and more severe than usual, when Miss Hermione cast her eyes, with their customary disapproving glance, over her niece's figure, from the points of her little shoes to the crown of lovely, offending hair.

"Aunt Angela," Valerie said, taking her cup from the lady's thin hands, "do you know that my visit is becoming quite a stay?"

"Yes. Don't say 'stay.' It is as incorrect as vulgar."

Valerie smiled.

"How particular you are!" she said. "Well, I was thinking that I should now begin the search for employment,—you remember?—in which you promised me your help."

There was a short silence. Miss Angela looked over the teapot at her sister, and to the cheeks of both ladies there rose the very faintest flush, almost imperceptible. They were momentarily uncom-

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fortable. It was as though this girl had read their very thoughts.

Miss Hermione's lips took that little straight line which put upon them the veiled, half smile of sarcasm that had done more to enrage Valerie than all her aunts' aggravating little ways.

"You have decided to try for something, then?" she said, while Angela crunched toast in a noisy accompaniment to her sister's words. "We thought that you had perhaps given up the idea; or that you were going to sit down quietly till employers searched for you." And she smiled, in a way that might have led anyone who knew her very little to believe that she spoke playfully; though no one could have passed over the gentle sting in her speech.

"Did you?" returned Valerie, with rising temper.

In an ordinary way she would have paid as little heed to this remark as she had paid to many another like it; but the anxiety and the weariness of the previous night had told upon her, the misery that was tugging at her heart made her fear that she could bear little more in silence.

"You were quite mistaken, then, Aunt Hermione; and if you were anxious about it, it is a pity you did not say so before."

"I merely thought that you might have shown a little more interest in your future. To a guest, it would have been discourteous to have said so . . ."

"There are worse things than discourtesy," the youngest Miss Drummond interrupted with what her hearers thought rude haste, and with the sweet colour coming angrily into her white cheeks. "What you say now is tantamount to telling me that you think I have been meaning to live here, on your charity, as long as you would let me, and with that end in view,

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to make no effort to do anything for myself. That is not only discourteous, but untrue."

"You forget yourself, Valerie!" breathed Miss Angela, shocked, and glancing a little nervously from her equally shocked sister to the quivering lips and fiery eyes of their niece.

"No, I do not. It is you who forget—you forget that you offered me your home, and that, having accepted your offer, however anxious I might be to get away from it, I should have at least sufficient good manners to hide from you that fact, in the very first days of my life beneath your roof."

The old ladies had turned pale; the hollows in Miss Hermione's temples deepened, the sharp outline from ear to chin set squarely, and her mouth grew very hard.

"You mean to infer that you are anxious to leave—us?"

"I mean to have it understood that I will stand insult from none, not even you, to whom I owe my home and my bread. And when you practically accuse me of the intention of living upon you, you insult me! I do wish to leave here—I wish to be independent of you or anyone, and to work for myself; but I scarcely thought it would accord with your ideas of politeness to tell you so before my visit was a fortnight old, before my father had been dead much more than a month."

"You are exceedingly vulgar, Valerie."

"Am I? Well, I would rather be that than petty. I don't wish to be rude to either you or Aunt Angela; but I will say this—I have borne more veiled impertinences since I have been here than I have ever borne in the whole of my life. I—I—could have done anything you wished, I could have tried to be

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what you wished, and to have loved you," she went on passionately, with a little impatient movement that nearly upset her cup, "but you would not let me. You spoil every act of kindness by making it felt that it is one to a dependent; you give, and every hour you remind the recipient of your gift that you *have* given,—you would only do this to one who dare not resent it!"

"And this is your gratitude . . ."

"I am grateful! I tell you I could have blessed and cared for you all my life. You do not understand or know it, but I came to you at a moment when ever so little love, ever so little sympathy, when the knowledge of even a little comprehension of how empty my heart and my life were, would have won you my love and my gratitude, and would have given you a claim on my truest affections. You might have changed me in so many ways—you have no idea of what you might have done for me—then, if you had been kind to me in another way. As it is, I can never think of you affectionately, because you have not lost an opportunity of wounding me either by reference to my own position, or to the life I led with my father. I knew that one day I should turn upon you," with an odd little defiant smile that nearly took the breath of both ladies away. "I have said, now, what is in my heart, and I feel better for it, but I shall be grateful if you will show me the way to those employers for whom you think I have been sitting down and waiting!"

And Valerie pushed her chair back with a scraping of the oak floor that gave evidence of a good deal of temper, and went out of the room, leaving her aunts jumping in their seats as she banged the door.

They were first of all cowards; there was that in

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both their natures which goes far towards the making of the bully ; and they had never been attacked either with so much violence or so much truth. And the result was that they were left speechless, and secretly a little afraid.

As for Valerie, though she declared that she felt better for having said what was in her mind, she was very close to tears, shaking in every limb, and stifled within the walls of the house. She craved for the sight of the open sea, for a long brisk walk along her favourite cliff path. She wanted freedom, and not the close confinement of the house ; and yet she did not follow the impulse which prompted her to leave it. She dreaded to go out now, in the daylight, lest she should meet anyone from Delmar Lodge. She almost made up her mind to go back to London, and to Marshall and his wife, at once. But she put that idea from her quickly—it was too tempting to be encouraged, just yet, at all events.

"I must be patient just a little longer," she said to herself, parading up and down her room. "I don't suppose I should be likely to get anything suitable, anything that would take and keep me away from everybody I have ever known, without their help. After all," thinking of Brabazon, while a hot wave of colour spread over her face, "he may not come near this part of the world." She remembered how he had spoken of his wife's amiability in keeping out of his way, and she fervently hoped that Pat was doing so at this moment. And through all her restlessness, through every thought that came and went in her mind, there rung again the words that Wingate had spoken to her but yesterday: "A man to whom I cannot understand any decent woman speaking a second time!"

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"If he knew! If he knew!" she said over and over again. "He would despise me, I should not have to keep out of his way, he would never wish to speak to me again," Valerie thought, with the hot flush dying out of her face, and the old feeling of shame that she had battled with, more fully upon her now than ever before. And though she asked herself, with some impatience, what matter if he, who was but a stranger to her, thought ill or well of her, she could not find an indifferent answer to give, even to her own heart, an answer wherewith to cheat herself into the belief that she cared nothing.

Unconsciously she was already anxious to stand well in his eyes; already she knew in her heart that she would sooner anyone discovered the secret of her past than this man, whom she had seen but a few times, of whom she knew scarcely anything.

The day passed drearily; the snow fell in heavy flakes, and afforded Valerie a good excuse for remaining within doors.

Somewhat to her surprise, when she and her aunts met again, the slight breeze of the breakfast-table seemed to be forgotten—at all events it was ignored. And as the ladies were inclined to make themselves agreeable to her, Valerie readily and gladly fell in with their mood.

That night Miss Hermione passed over the advertisement sheets of the *Morning Post* to her niece, with the suggestion that she should mark anything seeming suitable, and hand them back to her aunts for inspection. And Valerie sat for an hour beneath the light of a lamp mumbling half aloud, "Wanted a nursery-governess for two little girls." "Required at once, a governess for one boy,

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experienced." "Wanted, lady's help." "Wanted young ladies' companion, age not under thirty-five."

"The only really promising advertisements I can see are for parlourmaids and cooks," she said at last, in desperation. "They ask for, and appear to be offered all sorts of advantages ; but the governesses," and an expressive, rather disgusted shrug finished the sentence.

"I have found one," said Miss Angela, looking up over her glasses: "'Wanted immediately, a governess-companion for two little boys, aged four and three. Must be good tempered, obliging, well recommended, and have no objection to a little light housework. Abstainer, Church of England. Salary £24.' How does that strike you?"

"I can't say I feel inclined to jump at it," returned Valerie. "The light housework is possibly only the thin end of the wedge, and I should find I was little more than a general servant in the end. I admit," as Miss Angela frowned, "that it is a little difficult to find anything for which I *am* suited ; but I won't begin with housework, thank you, because I've never even held a duster."

"Then I don't think I would let anyone know it," said Miss Hermione promptly, and Valerie interposed with haste—

"I might teach very young children, but it seems there is little demand for companions——"

"Not for young girls—in these days," replied Miss Angela, with severity in her voice. "There was a time when nice, sensible, well-mannered ladies were in demand, but that day is past. Girls do as they please now, and go where and with whom they please. And from what I know of you, Valerie, I

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do not think you would be likely to make yourself content in the home of old people."

"It would depend upon the old people," smiled Valerie, a little dubiously. "One never gets much of a salary at that sort of work, does one?"

"That also depends upon the people. But if I may pass the remark, without risking the danger of a violent outburst from you, Valerie, I should say that you—that your appearance would be a good deal against your getting among nice, kindly, Christian people."

"My appearance! Why, what is the matter with it?"

Valerie was not angry, a fact which her aunts realised with two little sighs of relief. She seemed to be rather amused.

"It is a little—er—remarkable," said Miss Angela, while the eyes of both ladies roamed over the slender, black-robed figure that was full of grace in every line and curve, and upward to the delicate beauty of the perfect little face, and the crown of wonderful, waving, brilliant hair. "I hardly know how to express my meaning; and you are not easy to advise. But I would suggest that you wore more—more—ordinary clothes, of a more ordinary cut, and that you parted your hair down the centre, and made some endeavour to induce it to set a little closer to your head."

She stroked her own faded hair down on both sides of her face, nearly over her ears, as she spoke, in a manner that was a half suggestion to Valerie to adopt a similar style of head-dress.

"I must try," said the girl good humouredly, struggling with a smile, but without much enthusiasm. And to herself she was saying—

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I suppose there's a sort of ungovernable jealousy latent in even old women like that!"

And the hours lengthened into days, and the days into two more weeks, before there was any sign of the search for employment being a successful one.

And then, one morning, Miss Hermione read aloud a letter that she had received from the doctor's wife, which lady had heard of "just the post for Miss Valerie," and hastened to give all information concerning it without delay.

There was nothing to which Valerie could raise any reasonable objection; indeed, she was ready to jump at the first chance that offered her an opportunity of leaving Dale; and so it was arranged that she should go back to town on the morrow for the purpose of interviewing the lady who might require her services, and remain there till she entered upon her new duties.

And this being settled, Valerie threw off the last rag of care and anxiety, she thrust aside all fear, which in a measure had worn itself out by degrees during these uneventful days when she had kept herself a willing prisoner at Dale; and with the knowledge that she would soon be out of the house of those women who had the knack of rousing in her all that was worst, she brightened considerably.

Most of the day she devoted to packing. When tea was a thing of the past, she put on her outdoor garments, and slipped by a side way into the gardens of Dale.

There was a high wind blowing; the air was crisp and cold, and the shadows of evening were rapidly falling upon land and sea when Valerie turned swiftly out of the dim gardens and into the little path which led from them up to the cliff.

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It was the evening which would be her last beneath her aunts' roof—that was not a very sad thought; it was perhaps the last time she would look out on to this wide stretch of sand, this restless, beautiful bit of the sea—that was a thought that held just a vague touch of half regret. Far away behind her lay the land, that on this clear, dark night looked very fair, and a little mysterious. The meadows seemed to be carpeted darkly; where earth and sky met, the great bare trees stood out like weird, fantastic giants in a story-book, with huge arms outstretched to the world. Far away there could be seen the twinkling lights of Deeping—the only bit of light visible.

She stood long in the same position, with the darkness and the gloom in front of her, the still, peaceful country and the light behind her. And she shuddered. The thought came, and forced itself upon her, was it portentous of the future? The darkness ahead, the light left behind?

With a quick movement she turned her back determinedly against the chill outlook, her face to the clear sky. And as she turned, she realised that she was no longer alone.

Wingate stood before her; and without the slightest attempt on her part at pretended surprise, she gave him her hand.

"And so you have come here at last!" he said.

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XIV

"**A**T last," Valerie echoed, a little questioningly.

The swift colour had flown to her face, her heart was beating with mingled pleasure and uneasiness. She had hoped that this man had quite forgotten her, and at the same time feared it; she was glad and sorry both to meet him once more, and she was conscious of a foolish, childish hysterical longing to let the tears that she had checked so long, flow unrestrained.

"Yes; at last," he repeated. "Would you have me believe that you are not well aware that I know you have not been here since that last day at Delmar, when you turned your back deliberately upon us one and all?"

"Oh, not deliberately, not—only because I could not help it—not ungratefully."

He made an impatient movement at the word, and she asked swiftly—

"They—they did not think that?"

"No, they think nothing unkind of you, if that is what you care most to hear. It was through me that you were dragged, perhaps against your will, to Delmar, through me that we annoyed you, and possibly caused you a great deal of trouble—by our attentions; and so I took it upon myself to explain the situation as I thought I understood it, and as I thought you would best like it explained. Delmar

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and his sisters, having met the ladies at Dale, understood readily enough; and what I could not explain, I left them to get out of their own imaginations. That is why," with a sound of sharp resentment in his voice that was hasty, and a little less soft than she remembered it, "you have been left in peace."

She made no answer. She had walked onward while he spoke, and he kept pace by her side, now.

"Have they been keeping you a prisoner," he asked presently, "or have you been one of your own free will."

"I might have come here almost every hour of the day and evening, if you mean that," she returned. "You must not give them blame that is not due to them."

"Then what kept you away?"

She might have answered truthfully "You," but she kept silence—miserable, restless silence.

"Was it that you wished to avoid me, also? You knew that I should come here."

"Yes. After what you said to me as I left Delmar, I thought it not unlikely."

"Thank you."

"Well, I have come to-night, anyway, have I not? And you may save your unkind speeches; it is not worth while being cross with a person you will very likely never have an opportunity of being cross to again. I've come to-night—and it is to say good-bye."

"Good-bye!"

"Yes; I am leaving Dale to-morrow."

"Leaving Dale? Leaving your aunts? Do you mean for always?" Wingate followed one sharp question with the other, swiftly, while a puzzled frown drew his brows together. "Is it some sudden decision?"

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"Four distinct questions," laughed Valerie, with her head bent against the wind. "Which shall I answer first?"

"Which you like; only tell me what you really mean."

"Is not my meaning simple enough? I am going away. For always? Well, that is hard to say off hand, but I think it very likely."

"And you knew—all along; and you kept it a secret?"

"I have known that I must go some day. I told you so; but when the actual moment would arrive I did not know till to-day. It is anything but a secret. It has been discussed at wearying length, I can assure you."

The wind was playing havoc with her hat; it blew the little shining strands of hair across her eyes, and with its rough, damp breath, brought a glow of colour to her cheeks.

"You would have gone," Wingate said, "without letting me—any of us at Delmar know."

And it was not because she could not hear him in the wind, which rose boisterously above his voice, that she was silent for a long moment.

"It is not so very interesting," she remarked, when the pause had become awkward.

"You knew well that it would be interesting to me," he said. "But perhaps you think . . ."

She made a gesture half deprecatory, half impatient, which checked his hasty words.

"I think I am becoming abominably untruthful," she declared, vexedly; and, in spite of the wind, lifted her head and looked him full in the eyes.

"It's the life here—the continual necessity for changing the words that come naturally, for those

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which do not express what I want them to express, but are, perhaps," with a little laugh, "more polite. I suppose it is not odd that one's surroundings, the people with whom one lives, should influence one for bad or good—I never believed in that sort of thing before; but now I catch myself uttering some petty lie, or worse, some half truth, rather than call down upon my head an elaborate lecture that must end in my being rude to somebody—and, as there is never anyone else handy, one of my aunts!"

"I don't think that need weigh very heavily on your mind," Wingate returned; "I cannot imagine you, in any circumstances, being other than the soul of truth and——"

She turned from him sharply, smothering a little cry of passionate disclaimer that rose to her lips.

"Then you will please begin to imagine me all over again! I'm not a nice person at all; in fact, I am hateful. And, what is more important," she added, with one of those quick changes of manner which kept one always a little pleasantly in doubt as to what she might do or say next, "I'm very tired. Whoever put up that old bench has my deepest gratitude. I'm going to sit on it now, and watch the sea, and . . ."

"And tell me why you are going away." He interrupted quickly, but not following her to the rough bench, on to which she dropped with a weary air that was very new to her.

"I couldn't live here quite all my life, you know," Valerie replied, with her chin in the palm of one hand and her eyes on the sea. "I only came to stay after—after father died, and till they, my aunts," with a curious, half unconscious imitation of Miss Angela's deliberate tones, "should have found me

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'lady-like employment.' What is lady-like employment?" suddenly looking up at him through the fast-deepening shadows.

"I suppose there are many kinds that would come under that head. But you don't mean me to understand that—that they are launching you out on the world alone, to——"

"Oh, don't blame them. It is not all their doing. I am more than willing to go. I'd rather be a servant than go on living here. When I come along this path, I think of some poor prisoner whose eyes might turn always to the sea in search of freedom; but there's never freedom from one's thoughts, is there? There's never . . ."

She had been speaking more to herself than to him; and now she ceased abruptly and confusedly, as she looked up to catch his keen eyes bent earnestly upon her.

"I had no idea you were as unhappy as this," he said gravely. "To be sure, I have had no opportunity of seeing you in your temporary home. You have taken very good care of that! I wish you had not," suddenly abandoning his position at the edge of the cliff, and seating himself beside her on the bench. "I wish you had let me——"

"Keep coming to Dale? Keep telling them that you knew father once, just when he was having the worst time he ever had—when mother died, and I was born? Oh, that would have been a red rag to a bull! They never forgave him for being unlike themselves, and for marrying someone of whom they knew nothing. They would have read you a lecture in the end—yes, even you!—and you could not have said much, because they are defenceless old ladies—and they would have forbidden me ever to

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“speak to you, and I should have disobeyed them in the very spirit of mischief, if nothing else; and then I should have been acting more dishonourably than I am acting now.”

“Dishonourably!”

“From their point of view—yes. Can you imagine that if they thought I was here talking to you now—oh, can you fancy it! Why, I just tried to make myself a little pleasant to Mr James, the curate you know, and he’s the stupidest thing one could meet anywhere, and Aunt Angela was furious. I heard her say to Aunt Hermione, afterwards, that ‘the girl has a way with her eyes which is—er—er—most unpleasant!’ I was the girl, you understand, and I was boring myself to death to try and be civil!”

“I think that Miss Drummond was right, however,” said Wingate, with an odd smile. “She used the word ‘unpleasant’ most incorrectly,” as Valerie turned round in sharp surprise, “but you certainly have a ‘way’ with your eyes that—well, that I wish you had not, child—at least I wish that it was one which no one else had ever detected but myself . . .”

“Oh, Man! Thy name is Unreason!” she returned, with flippancy with which she instinctively tried to cloak a sense of nervousness that amounted almost to fear.

“Is not that a wish that is a little selfish too?”

“I suppose it is,” he said, while the eyes in question met his through the dusk, with a touch of coquetry in their depths that mingled oddly with their natural frank innocence. “I suppose it is—because, like all other wishes, like all my thoughts of you, it is, perhaps, what you would call selfish. It is selfish to wish that all your life had been colourless—that none had shared it . . .”

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"How do you know that it is not so?"

He shook his head unbelievably. She had checked his words, that had begun to ring with a touch of haste, almost of passion, with quiet ease that might well have been born of habit, at least, of a good deal of experience. And he answered her with a shade of regret in his voice, that sent a momentary chill to her heart.

"Because, from the very little which you have told me of your life with your father, I know that it must have been one of unusual freedom, one of delightful, careless happiness. Because I know, that though you may seem a little friendless here, there must be many whom you might count your friends if you would. And more than that, there must be some who brought into your life happiness—even love. And it is that thought which makes me selfish, which makes me wish that it were otherwise, so that in time—when——" One chill, gloved little hand plucked at her furs, and Wingate, leaning forward, took the restless fingers in his, and stripping them of their soft, suede covering, carried them deliberately to his lips.

"It is a little cold, after all," said Valerie quietly, "and, I think, rather late."

As she rose, Wingate released her hand sharply. Just so could he fancy a woman of his own world answering him, just so could he imagine her bringing to an abrupt conclusion a flirtation that she feared she had carried a little too far. The thought was hateful. It roused in him the half fear that he had determinedly put away from him from that hour when he had first met her. He tried to see his watch in the dim light, and, failing, struck a match with exaggerated care.

"It is nearly a quarter to seven," he said, and

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turned with her in the direction of Dale. A long silence fell upon them, which lasted till the little private path leading down into the Dale gardens was reached.

Her heart was by no means at rest. In five minutes they would have parted, perhaps never to meet again. This, she felt, ought to be her hope, and knew well that it was not. She had checked the words which, a few minutes ago, he would have spoken to her, and she was miserably conscious that he knew she had checked them deliberately, purposely. A little feeling of desolation—desolation utterly unlike that which she had known such a short time ago—crept over her, and forced to her eyes the tears she fought to hold back.

"And now you have not told me where you are going to-morrow," he said, with, she thought, great cheerfulness. "But I must strive to break myself off the habit of asking questions. I hope, however," and not giving her time to answer, "that it is where you will be happier than you have been here. Good-bye, Miss Drummond. You are quite safe? Mind the edge of that dip in the path! It is dark there. Good-bye again."

He held her hand lightly in his for a short moment, then turned away, and replacing his cap upon his head, strode in the opposite direction without another word or the faintest sign of a backward glance. And Valerie stood where he left her, dumb, like one chained to the spot, her eyes wide with wonder and heavy with unshed tears, her heart cold within her.

Only by a superhuman effort had she refrained from running after him, from calling him back.

She knew that she had angered him a little and disappointed him greatly; and, intuitively, she under-

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stood that to-night he had depended upon her to put out of his mind some half doubt against which he might have been fighting, and, instead, she had strengthened it.

"So best!" she told herself, running down the path with reckless haste, and entering the house with a slightly defiant air. But her breath came unevenly, and she brushed the back of one hand half angrily across her eyes, as she sped up to her own rooms.

XV

THE next morning was occupied with the last of the packing, and the receiving of endless directions from Miss Angela, who had a perfect talent for arranging other people's affairs to her own taste—a talent which was wasted to-day, for Valerie heeded nothing that was said to her, and answered Miss Angela with indifference that was maddening.

At last the horses were at the door. Upton stood ready to watch the departure of the guest, with the first trace of amiability that Valerie had ever seen on his sour face, and both old ladies came as far as the centre of the hall to take leave of their niece.

"You will let us have a card to-morrow?" said Miss Hermione, "and we both trust that you will be very happy."

They kissed her, on this occasion, and received her murmured expressions of thanks with gracious smiles.

And then the doors of Dale closed upon her. The slow old horses dragged their way down the long drive, and Valerie looked out on to the dull, grey country, without much hope and without much interest. Again she had started out on a new path, and she wondered whither it would lead her; but at this moment she cared very little.

She was glad that her aunts had not offered to see her off at the station, because, free of their presence, she was able to secure a place in a first-class carriage,

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Indeed, there were few passengers bound for London, and Valerie took possession of a whole compartment, which the guard evidently intended that she should keep for herself, since he carefully locked both doors. Then a boy brought her some papers, and a whistle was blown, and the train moved slowly out of the station.

Valerie remembered that they would stop at Mitching, and after that, run straight through to London. And she pushed aside the papers, threw herself back in the corner, and closed her eyes.

Mitching was reached before she realised that she had well started on her journey. There was a good deal of bustle at the station, and she noticed, aimlessly, from her position at the side of the train farthest from the platform, that the guard took up a slightly forbidding position close to the door of her compartment.

In another moment he had unlocked, and flung it wide open. His face wore a relieved smile, and his hand went smartly up to his cap.

"Here you are, sir!" he was saying briskly. "Thought you managed to miss it! . . . Right, sir!"

And the door banged, there was a shrill whistle, a shout of "Right behind!" Then someone, breathing quickly, sprang into the carriage, and with a low, soft laugh, sat down opposite Valerie.

"Did I frighten you? Are you not going to shake hands with me?" asked Wingate; while with merciless eyes he watched the colour rush to her face, and fade away again to leave her white as death. "I did frighten you! Forgive me!"

He leant forward, and took first possession of her muff, which he threw aside, and then of both her hands.

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"Why don't you say something to me?"

"I don't understand—I——"

"Is it so odd that I should want to go to London too?"

"I think it is—at least by this train . . ."

"Then I will confess that I wanted to talk to you."

"But you could not have known, you . . ."

"I could make a very shrewd guess, which turned out to be the right one. Well?"

She shrugged her shoulders. Her courage was returning. The miserable sense of desolation was fast slipping away from her in his presence; and she kept her eyes lowered, lest he should read in them that the sound of his voice, the touch of his hands on hers, brought to her a gladness which she was striving to hide from him.

"I am afraid I was almost rude last night," Wingate said, a little ruefully.

"You were vexed with me."

"I think I was; but I've suffered for it ever since."

"You flung my hand away from you *then*," looking down at her imprisoned fingers, "as though—as though——"

"Heaven forgive me! I was angry, I confess it. And there is more still that I must confess to you. It is why I am here. I guessed you would be going to town, wherever else you might go afterwards, and I knew there were only two good trains for you to choose from—this and the night one. So you see, there was only the next to wait for if you had not taken this."

"But the guard, he . . ."

"He is a genius! only he does not count, now. Look at me, Val! You know what angered, what

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disappointed me last night—why did you do it—why? It was deliberate, determined.”

“I know,” she returned, very low.

“You were afraid . . .”

“Yes.”

“Of me?” incredulously.

“No; never of you; only, perhaps, of what you were going to say.”

“Why?”

“I cannot tell you, don’t ask me! It sounds horrible to you that I should say so much; it must, it does to me. But I can’t help it, it must be the truth to you, so far, whatever happens.”

“And it must be the truth to you, now and always. You know that you are dear to me—a woman always knows. You know that it has been so almost from the first hour that we met. I don’t think I ever tried to hide what was in my heart—I only tried to keep from telling you too soon, I only fought with a desire to take you away from the dreary, unsatisfactory life you were leading, to one of happiness such as you had never yet known; to take you, with or without your will, where no eyes but mine might ever rest on you. Don’t you, can’t you understand that what has taken almost all the sweetness out of the thought of my love for you, out of the hope that you had given me a place in your heart, has been jealousy . . .”

“You speak wildly.”

“I speak the truth! I was jealous of those old ladies, who, little as they might care for you, shared your life; I am jealous of all those who—who—shared it before you came here. Why,” suddenly, “do you keep your face turned away? Why did you say, just now, that it must be the truth to me

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'whatever happens'? Why were you afraid that I should say to you last night what I am saying now? Val, answer me, look at me. My darling, you are not angry at my being here, not angry at one word I have said. You know——"

With an enormous effort she lifted her eyes to his, and, snatching her hands from his hold, held them up, with a piteous little gesture that implored silence.

"Don't say any more," she pleaded breathlessly. "Do not. It—it—is all impossible. You can't mean it. You have made a mistake. Oh, why did you come here at all? Why could you not just let me go—and—and—forget me?"

"Because I love you. The explanation is very simple, and to my mind an all-sufficient one. Val, don't you hear, don't you understand, that you look at me like that?"

"Oh, I hear, and I understand, all too well. But I tell you it is a mistake. It can't be. It must not."

"And I ask you why? Do you imagine that I am mistaken in what I feel towards you? I, who in all my life, and it is almost double the length of yours, never yet fancied that any other woman was dear to me? Do you think that I have waited all these years for the one woman to come into my life, and then not know it, then allow myself to be mistaken?"

He took her hands again, and now pulled from them the long gloves, and because they were so chill, chafed them gently first, and then held them, first one and then the other, close against his lips. Her heart seemed to stand still; her eyes rested mistily upon his bared, bent head. She had thought her heart dead to love for ever; and now she understood that, till this moment, she had never even guessed

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at its real meaning. However she had despised herself, she had still thought that love, which the misery of shame and humiliation had killed, had been responsible for the ruin of her life; but now she knew that what she had felt for the man who had laid waste all her youth, and robbed her of every future hope, was something as far apart from what she felt for the man at her side, from the passionate tenderness that leapt up in her heart in answer to that which shone in his eyes, and rung out clearly in his voice, as the pure, flower-scented breeze of summer is to the scorching, destroying breath of a furnace. And the knowledge brought her no joy; it turned her sick and faint with even a new dread.

"Have you no word for me? Are you not going to answer my question, and tell me why you look upon my love as impossible, a mistake?"

Further silence was out of the question; with his eyes fixed on hers, while he waited patiently for her reply, she knew that she must say something, and she cast about for some words which would mean little, and gain her a little time.

"You have known me so short a time. We have, after all, met but seldom," she began weakly; while Wingate, with an impatient movement, dropped her hands, and took a few steps up and down the narrow flooring of the compartment.

"What is time?" he said, suddenly coming back to her side, and resting one knee on the seat next to her. "What difference does it make? A day, a month, a year! However long I knew you, I could never love you more dearly. I knew it would be so from that night when we first met. I knew it was so when we met again; and I have understood that I can know no rest away from you, through all these

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miserable days when you have purposely kept yourself a prisoner in your aunts' house. Are you keeping silence that I may read by it that you have no place in your heart for me? You have told me before that I am persistent, and you may tell me, now, that I am presumptuous too. But unless I hear it from your own lips, I will not believe that I am nothing to you. I will not believe that you do not care. I won't believe that, though I may have but a small corner in your heart now, the day will not come when you will give it all to me—all your heart, all your love, all your life, your every thought, as I give mine to you, and you alone. No," leaning down, and lifting her face with gentle force to his, "I prefer, after all, to take my answer from your eyes. Something tells me they may be kinder . . ."

Her face was framed in his hands; against her will, almost without her knowledge, she yielded to his tender hold. And her eyes, compelled by his, were no longer lowered. Through a mist they met his gaze, and beneath it, answering it, grew humid, lustrous, gentle with the infinite gentleness of a love that momentarily banished fear, and dulled the memory of every bitter thing.

He drew her upward into his arms till she rested on his heart; he closed the tear-filled eyes and quivering lips with slow, lingering kisses.

"Is it true?" he whispered to her. "Heart of my heart, has the day come already?" And then, at last, she seemed to wake to life, to memory. With a low cry that was like a moan of pain, she put him sharply from her, and went, with faltering step, made more unsteady by the rocking of the rapidly moving train, to the opposite side of the carriage.

"Have you no mercy, no pity!" she breathed so

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low that he could barely catch the words, while she shrank far away into the corner, and let her face fall forward on to her hands. "Oh, what have I done—what have I done!"

"I cannot understand you, or your manner to-day," Wingate said, very quietly, though one fleeting glance into his face showed her that it was white and stern. "What does it mean? What do your words mean? You love me—your eyes have told me, even if your lips were silent—and yet you shrink from me now as one in fear. You love me, and yet you have tried to put me from you and make me think that my love is but a fancy. You must have some reason—it is but justice that I——"

"It is but just that you should know the truth," she answered him suddenly. "Oh, bear with me, grant me your patience but a little while. I have been silent because I am a coward—I have been a coward too long. You love and you believe in me. Can you not think what it is to me to tell you that your faith and trust are misplaced. You know nothing of my life, yet you would link yours to it, yet you would give your name into my keeping. And it is left for me," with a little ring of hopeless agony in her soft voice, "to bid you—to warn you against——"

"Val!" His hands fell on hers in a grip that was painful. "Do you know—have you any idea what you are saying?"

"Perfectly. Listen," she added, while a great bitterness crept into her voice, a bitterness that lent a strange force to its low, mellow tones. "I—believe it now, whatever you must be forced to think of me after—I do care, as I never dreamed it was in me to care, as, six weeks ago, I should not have deemed it possible I could care. I love you—in that at least I

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cannot lie to you. And it is because of that, because I know what your faith, your loyalty would be, that I tell you there may be nothing between you and me but separation—now, at once, for ever. It is because, in this little time, more than all in this last hour, I have learnt, I understand all that your love might mean for me, that while I confess you are dear to me, I bid you leave me—forget the words you have said, forget my existence. And oh, if you would make the way a little more easy for me, leave me without question, without seeking to know more than that there is but one thing for us—to part.”

He heard her in silence, he listened carefully to every word she uttered ; and when she paused, a little breathlessly, his hold upon her hands tightened.

“I cannot—I will not!” he returned with determination. “If you know what your words convey—if you have any idea . . .”

“I know what I say. I bid you leave me now, because when you know all, not all my love can ever bring you happiness. I bid you hate me, despise me—anything except believe in me. There are women as young, far fairer than I, who will give you love—women whose hearts you may have laid bare to you. Go to them, make one of them the holder of your peace, let her bear your name and guard your honour—go to any, but do not trust your happiness to me.”

“But if I would be the judge,” he said, his voice sinking to a whisper, his face devoid of colour, “if I will not believe the words you utter against yourself? You may have that to tell me of wrongs done to you, but never of wrong done by yourself. You child! What can there be in your life that you need hold secret from me, to whom you are dearest? A little sorrow perhaps, a——”

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The words died on his colourless lips. He looked into her eyes and read there something that seemed to stop the beats of his heart; he watched her cower farther away, and marked the burning flame of red that crept up from her throat to the very roots of her hair.

A low, sharp cry escaped him; and before she could resist, he leant down to her again and held her crushed against his breast, while he looked down into her eyes with mingled dread and terrible longing in his own.

"Answer me!" he commanded hoarsely. "You madden me till you force the question that is an insult, from me. What is there in your life which . . ."

She put her cold, ungloved hand before his mouth swiftly; and the colour, which had burned in her face, faded slowly away till she went to the pallor of death.

"That which forbids me to be your wife, or the wife of any man," she said very slowly.

And in the utterance of these words it seemed as if her last breath had gone from her out on to the dead silence that was their only answer.

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XVI

WINGATE'S arms unclosed slowly, they let go their hold upon her lingeringly, yet with a certain decision; they fell to his sides as though, momentarily, all power had left them. And Valerie, free, weak and faint, with a touch of sudden cold numbing her from head to foot, groped her way blindly across the floor of the carriage, and sank down in the corner farthest from Wingate, with a movement that seemed to show that her limbs refused to support her another moment.

But her eyes never left him. They had had the courage to meet his while her lips uttered the words which would put them asunder; they had the courage to watch every expression that passed over his face, that was suddenly grey and drawn, that in the last few minutes had grown old. He threw himself on to the seat opposite to her; and then he was so silent, so still, that there might hardly have been life in him. He looked at her, but with the eyes of a man who is dazed or sightless; he breathed as a man might breathe who had received his death-blow. If he had any words to say to her they would not come,—speech was for the moment impossible.

Only the rumble of wheels over the metals, only the incessant swaying of the train, only the steady rush through the air the occasional shriek of the

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engine. In a vague, half helpless way she wondered if these were all the sounds the world held, all it would ever hold for her. It seemed now as though she had been robbed of life, but yet that the full power to suffer had been left to her.

The dim, grey afternoon grew darker to her eyes, earth and sky seemed to join in a wide, mocking smile at her. The silence was almost unendurable, yet she was as powerless to break it as he. And the minutes lengthened into perhaps half an hour—she never knew; only once he stirred, and that was to go to the other side of the compartment and to let his unseeing eyes gaze out upon the gloomy country that for ever more would be hideous in his sight. A slight shudder passed over her: she noticed that half unconsciously, perhaps instinctively, he had put the distance of the whole carriage between them. She sat crouched far into her corner, her eyes only stealing glances at his stern face now and again, her hands clasped tightly in her lap.

It came to her that if she had been less truthful, if she had held her peace, she might have been the happiest woman on earth at this moment instead of the most miserable. Pat Brabazon would never betray her, the little world that had been hers might have been dead to her from this moment if she had so willed it—Wingate would have been more than willing to take her to the farthest corner of the earth—her secret might have remained locked away in her own breast from him . . . She thrust aside the thought with the same gesture as she might have thrust aside some object, some living thing abhorrent to her. It had never once occurred to her to try to deceive him. His love, his complete faith in her, his whole clean, simple life, spent in worship of her,

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would have been torture unspeakable if her soul might not be laid bare to him, if her eyes must fall beneath that searching glance of his.

The sudden movement she made, the unconscious throwing out of her hands, as the thought presented itself, and as it was thrust from her mind, roused Wingate. His eyes came back from their hazy contemplation of the dull, moving landscape; slowly he reached her side again.

"Tell me it is not true," he said. "Tell me that this last half-hour has been a horrible dream—not the truth! Val, say it was a lie—all a lie, to try me—to—never mind the object of it. I could forgive anything if I might hear from your lips that it was a lie."

His voice quivered on the words, and he looked down into her eyes with a look so longing, so strained with hope and fear, that for a moment she let her head fall forward till her eyes were hidden against the sleeve of his coat.

"I dare not! Do you think I would wound your heart to test it? Do you think I would bring you a moment's suffering if I could help it? It is the truth—it had to be told, and I had to tell it. I might have held you with a lie, I might have kept your love with deception, but so, it would have lost all its sweetness, so, it would have been worthless. Don't make me speak of it any more—go, leave me. If you can, forgive; if you will, forget me."

"I cannot," he made answer slowly, but with infinite tenderness, with passionate yearning in the tone rather than in the words, that made her look up swiftly in a flash of unconscious hope. "You bid me do what you know is impossible; you tell me what should break down my faith, and drive my

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love to forsake you, and I—I only know in this moment that passion is stronger than wisdom, that life is worthless without you, my arms empty for ever if you leave them, my heart dead if you may not rest on it. I only know that though guilt and dishonour form the barrier between us, my soul is crying out to you—whatever you are, be mine! And yet . . . ”

“ Ah! ”

The one little word left her lips in a breathless sob. She had read pardon and love in every tone and glance of his. While he spoke she had vaguely dreamed of the possibility of a future that should blot out the past; and as the words “ And yet . . . ” came heavily to her on the hopeless sigh that carried them, the little warmth that had touched her heart gave place to the old chill numbness.

She sat motionless, while the train whirled on through numberless stations now, while those that were familiar to her showed their names in little blurred flashes of white letters, while every passing moment brought her nearer to her journey's end, and every landmark told her that London was close at hand.

Wingate was silent too. At what passed in his mind after the hopelessness of those two despairing words “ And yet . . . ” she could not even guess.

Presently the train slowed down a little, there was that dimness in the atmosphere that seems to belong alone to London; then station lights flashed out, some indistinct information was shouted on all sides, and the door of the carriage was hung upon by an ever-attentive porter. Mechanically, Valerie was putting on her gloves, as mechanically Wingate put her furs about her—furs too heavy

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for the season, perhaps, but not too heavy for her chilled body.

His every action forced upon her the knowledge that the moment of parting was at hand; the lifting of her dressing-bag from the rack, his brief directions to the porter, the touch of determination in the squaring of his shoulders as he stood up by the door—they all seemed to thrust into her mind, to whisper in her ears the dreaded "Good-bye" that must follow upon them.

"I forgot," he said, as he helped her to the platform, "that you have not said where you are going."

"To some old servants of mine in Chelsea," she returned.

"The address," he questioned; and she gave it, too miserable to wonder, too full of dread that the few steps between her and the waiting cab would be passed over with rapidity, to heed that he put the question.

She saw her bag being put inside; without interest she watched her boxes placed on another cab; then she turned and made a movement as though she would hold out her hand to Wingate; but he held her dress from the side of the door, and in another instant had followed her. Her eyes sought his, her lips parted in an effort to speak, the tears, through which she had seen all things dimly, fell at last down the whiteness of her soft cheeks. She could no more have said good-bye to him in the bustle of that crowded station than she could have flown—such farewell words as theirs must be could not be spoken with a hundred pairs of eyes looking on. He understood that too. They would be spoken here, perhaps now, or . . .

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"Why—have you—stayed?" she asked faintly.

"Need you ask?" he answered her with another question. "Did you think that I should leave you in that throng of people? Did you dream that I could stand calmly aside while you were taken from my sight, perhaps for ever? that I could see you go, not knowing where you went? Are you thinking that there is even a shade of anger in my heart against you? If so, you not only wrong me, but you misunderstand me terribly. If I have been silent, it is because I have been fighting with my thoughts, and fighting with the desire to put you first—before wisdom, before fear of the future, before all things that I have ever held dearest. If I have been silent, it is because I dared not say the words that rose in my heart, for your sake as well as for my own. Do you think I set no value upon the truth, as you have had the courage to reveal it to me to-day? Do you think that it is in my power only to condemn an error, and not to realise your need of pity and of pardon?"

"But though you might give me love, your faith, your trust could never be with me again," she said wistfully, breathlessly; and it seemed to her that they travelled many minutes before his answer came.

"Both would be yours, always. But memory would be mine! God knows, I would give half my life at this moment that it might not be so, but I know that I could never forget that some other life had reigned before me in your heart. It is that knowledge with which I have been battling."

Valerie was silent. She could frame no reply to words that seemed to her to set them even farther apart. The cab, which had been passing through the most dreary, squalid streets, now emerged from the

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unpleasant surroundings into those which were quite familiar to her. A minute and the river was in sight, a minute more and she found herself forcing a smile for old Marshall's benefit and deception. He contented himself with a low word of welcome, seeing that his mistress was not alone, and conducted her to the rooms set apart for her, to which, without surprise, she knew that Wingate was following her.

"We managed to keep your old rooms, Miss Valerie," Marshall said with some satisfaction.

"I see you have. That is very nice."

"And you will have tea now, Miss?"

"I—think so. Yes, please."

Her eyes went to the little table so well remembered, to some favourite china that had been her mother's, to the little kettle singing merrily over its spirit-lamp.

"You need not stay to make it, Marshall."

The old man permitted himself one glance at her white, weary face, another at Wingate's, set and stern as it was; then he went out and closed the door softly behind him.

"There's trouble in her heart, and in her pretty eyes, poor lamb," he said to his wife below stairs. "I'm inclined to think the child was born under an unlucky star; but I'm powerful glad to think she's back here again."

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XVII

VALERIE threw her hat and furs upon a sofa; she stooped for a moment over the tea-table; then a cup fell with a little clatter from her fingers, and she turned, holding out both hands beseechingly, to where Wingate stood by the window.

"Speak to me! For God's sake say something. I could bear your reproach and your deepest censure, but I cannot bear this silence. I bade you leave me, and you will not go—I——

He met her; before she had taken three steps towards him, he took both outstretched hands and drew her close, till the palms rested on his breast, till her upturned face was scarcely an inch from his.

"I have been fighting with myself—for you and for me," he returned, softly, slowly. "I have thought it out in every possible way, and, God help us both, I can see nothing for it but separation. I wish I could—I wish I could give reins recklessly to passion—I wish I could live for the moment and, squandering the mad joy of it, forget the future. But I can't—I tell you that the curse of memory would be upon me ever, it would rise up to kill our happiness, it would make a hell of our paradise. You have told me the truth—I honour you from my soul for it—but of the circumstances which led to it I know nothing. At this moment I do not feel that I want to know. Call it selfish if you will, but the one thing that stands out clearly in my mind is that our

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lives are laid waste. It may not," with new, jealous doubt in his voice, "be quite so with you. You love me now; but you must—you *must* have loved—then . . . "

"I must—I did! Even for you I will not attempt to deny it. If not, I should merit your deepest contempt. I called it love, I believed it love! I blinded myself to the truth, and I let another blind me, as I let him cheat me. It was only when I learned what such tenderness as yours might mean to me; it was only when I understood that my heart had slept till it awakened for you, that I realised how paltry, how shameful a thing was that which in ignorance I had thought love. I don't tell you this in an attempt at any excuse—there is no excuse in my case. I only give you, as I have given you all through, the simple truth; because I could not lie to you, because your love would be worthless to me if I took it in guilt, if I gave you deception for your faith. I never sought you; I tried with all my might to keep you from seeking me; you know that is truth too. You said rightly when you said that a woman always knows when she has grown dear to a man. I knew that I was dear to you; but I would have left you, I would have gone out of your life this very day, never to seek to come into it again—I would have spared you the knowledge that you have forced me to give you. But would you let me? No! Would you leave me? Would you rest till you had wrung from me a confession that has put upon me the bitterest humiliation, that has lowered me in the only eyes in which I desired to stand well—your eyes! Would you? No—no—a thousand times no! You must be just and own that. I left my home—this home in which you see me now—to

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go to that one in which you first met me. You may say I stooped to deception with my aunts—perhaps I did, but, as I had mapped out life for myself then, it could harm them not at all. And a drowning man catches at a straw. A woman who has lost all, even," a slow, painful red spreading over her face, "even all I had lost, must catch at her straw, must make a way for herself somehow. I thought to leave my old world and all in it behind, I thought to start afresh in a life that would be hateful to me, but that would at least be free from any kind of temptation. I meant to do it. And then you came. O God, had not my punishment been enough without that! Well, you know the rest. I tried to keep out of your way and you would not let me. I tried to escape you, and you followed me. I bid you go—leave me, now, and still you stay. Well, go; but do not stay to wound me more, do not say, as you were going to say just now, 'You love me now, you loved another who came before me, you will love so neone else another day perhaps, and so we part; ' because, though I should love you madly, I should doubt you always! . . . "

She had snatched her hands out of his hold; she stood away from him, her eyes burning with the fire of misery, her face, even to her lips, livid, her breath coming pantingly, and her slender body rocking slightly from side to side as one rocks the body in an agony of grief.

He heard her out, and when her voice died away in a half sob, he followed her, and took her, this time forcibly, in his arms.

"You say the truth," he answered her. "You tried to keep out of my way and I would not let you; but how should I have guessed that you wanted to escape

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me? How could I guess that this hideous barrier would rise up between us? You were the one woman in all the world for me—I realised that, I think, in our first meeting. You filled my dreams asleep and my thoughts awake. Life, that had been a little dull, singularly useless to me, grew full of interest, full of sweetness, full of joy and hope, because of you, because of a possible future for us together. Was it likely that I should heed what might have been your caprice of the moment, and let you pass out of my life altogether? Was it likely that I should let you go without a struggle to win and keep you? You were alone, and so was I. Your life, I thought, had been very empty, and so, for different reasons, had been mine. I told you once that I was jealous of those old ladies who gave you so little love, I was jealous of the very servants who had the right to be near you. In all the world I wanted only you alone—apart, life was but half life; together, what might not the world hold for you and me? Love I had never known and scarcely believed in. No living woman had ever entered my life to whom I would have surrendered it, till you brought me thoughts of a love the world might hold for me, of a love truer, purer, holier than passion only. You say the truth when you say I should love you madly, but not when you say I should doubt you. If you were my wife I should believe in and trust you, I should give into your keeping fearlessly my honour; but I tell you, memory would never die within me—the memory of that other—it would murder peace. You would be my wife, and I should remember always that you had belonged once to another; you would be the mother of my children, and I should fancy I saw the light of another man's eyes in theirs. When you lay asleep

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in my arms, I should wake to remember that other arms had sheltered you; when you awoke on my heart, I should remember that another heart had pillowed your head. God! could we live through the torture of it, either you or I? You roused in me all that was best and truest, you gave me the power to love—can you not give me the power, too, to forget!"

His voice had sunk to a whisper, his arms held her with unconscious force, his eyes looked down into hers with a longing prayer. "To teach him to forget!" The words sent the hot blood to her face. It came to her that the power lay with her: if he would but let her use it, the power certainly lay with her. With the whole faith and devotion of her life, with all the tender passion of her heart that answered every beat of his, with such love as she would give him, he would—he must forget.

In another land, in a world of their own, if once he gave himself up wholly to love, she would teach him to forget. The words that would tell him so trembled on her lips, yet something within her seemed to hold them back. Even in this moment, when all life's happiness seemed to be fading from her sight, when all that made life worth living was going from her, she could not seem to plead with him for herself.

She drew his face down closer to her own, the loosened waves of her hair brushed his eyes, while into her own, deep with trouble, humid with tears, there came that light of victorious challenge with the sorcery of which she had mocked many, that touch of knowledge of her own power to sway men's hearts that had served her but ill. Of her own will she lifted her mouth to his.

"Could you bear separation now? What need to remember anything save that I am—yours?"

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The words in their caressing softness rose to them, but never passed her lips; they never became a sound that stole on his ear. Instead, the tenderness of her touch, the warmth of her caress, the whole mute despair with which she clung to him, seemed to breathe a farewell, to tell him silently that she knew as well as he that there was nothing left to them but separation. And he held her clasped to his breast as he might have held a woman loved and dying; he pushed back the roughened hair from her forehead, and looked down deep into her eyes—eyes that seemed clear and true as the stars, that answered his with nothing but the love that he had longed to read in them, yet that now brought him keenest misery.

In that moment it came to him that forgetfulness might be commanded more easily than he had allowed himself to believe; in that moment a subtle tempting wove itself around him; in that moment, with her heart beating out its misery on his, with the perfection of her beauty that might be his own held close within his arms, with the past thrust behind, and only the sweet, delirious joy of the future—of the future she could give him if he would—before his eyes, the taint on her soul was forgotten, the longing of his own alone remembered.

His strength was failing him, and he put her from him so that her heart no longer beat on his, so that he might read the despair in her eyes no more.

He went to the other side of the room. He stood by one of the little tables, unconsciously fingering the trifles which lay upon it. They consisted of a small heap of Valerie's belongings, which Marshall or his wife had evidently unearthed from some forgotten corner during her absence from home—a

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work-basket, a piece of unfinished sewing, a few books, and a large leather blotter bulging open with papers that had been crammed into it.

Wingate's fingers moved restlessly over its smooth surface; his eyes, deep with thought, stared down upon it without taking heed of what lay beneath his touch. Then after a long pause he turned to her with a movement of passionate entreaty, answering his own question that she had left unanswered.

"We could not live through the torture of it! Here, with you, I am weak; I have no strength for the temptation your presence brings to me, but yet, if I were chained to the spot, I could not feel more powerless to take farewell of you, to leave you now,—perhaps because I know that when we say good-bye they must be the last words that ever pass between us. We cannot part as men and women part every day—because they have tired, because they do not care, because they have quarrelled, because one has wronged the other; oh, because of a thousand common things, for numberless ordinary reasons. Ours is no common case; and though, for your peace and mine, because I fear memory more than death, we are doomed to live our lives apart, I cannot go out of your life now without knowing something of what *your* future is likely to be. You must see I am right, you——"

She made a gesture to silence him, and he another of still more passionate entreaty. She had come a little nearer to him, and he, as he turned towards her, caught the edge of the blotter he had been fingering, with an awkward movement which sent it to the ground, and scattered the letters within upon the floor.

He stooped impatiently to restore them to order,

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and a little smothered cry left Valerie's lips. Involuntarily her hand went out to arrest his; instinctively, jealously, Wingate's surprised eyes left her white face to look down upon that on which her intent gaze was fixed.

There, under his hand, lay a sheet of thick paper, at the top of which was stamped a familiar address. Almost unconsciously he lifted it from its scattered companions, and then deliberately his eyes read the few short words written boldly upon it.

"Most Dear,—Only just returned. With you this evening about six. All my love.—C. B."

The date was half a dozen months old.

The letter fell from Wingate's hand as though it was hot. He raised his head with a quick, savage movement, as a man might who had been struck full in the eyes. His hands closed upon her wrists and held her with unconscious violence. All the tenderness had died out of his face; a hideous conviction had come on him; and his voice rang hoarse through the silence, while his eyes went with a contemptuous glance to the letter that now lay between them at her feet.

"Cuthbert Brabazon! That man! I said to you just now that I did not know the circumstances of—of—the truth that you have told me . . . I do not need to now! Brabazon! That man! Tell me—tell me. Not even my own sight will I believe against your word, if you will say . . . God! Is it true that you were once . . . *his*?"

She bent her head. No sound passed her lips; but he saw the pallor of death overspread her face, he heard her breath come heavily, and felt her hands grow like ice. And he knew that her eyes would not

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meet his. Then his hold loosened upon her, and she stood alone.

"Why would you wait?" she said suddenly, wearily. "Why would you wait . . . for this? Why did you wait that I might know contempt had stepped in to tell you that forgiveness and forgetfulness were utterly impossible?"

There was terrible meaning, terrible calmness in the hopelessly spoken words. There was equally terrible meaning in the way her eyes went to the door. Hardly knowing what he did, Wingate turned. She saw him reach the door, his hand close upon the knob; in another moment she would have looked her last upon him. At the next clock-tick she was at his side, her hands clasped heavily on his arm.

"Not like that—not like that!" she cried wildly. "I would not wrong *you* with a lie . . . I gave you all the truth! Give me at least a little pity . . ."

He took her hands from his arm with the unconscious violence of suffering. He shut his eyes to the sight of her quivering lips and tear-stained cheeks, his ears to the pleading of her low, despairing voice.

He put her away from him with deliberation that seemed to turn her to stone. And then, without another look upon her face, he turned and left her.

Valerie listened breathlessly to the click of the latch, to his quick footfall on the stairs, to Marshall opening and closing the hall door, to the steps on the pavement below, dying away rapidly in the distance.

And suddenly a foolish, mirthless laugh left her lips; and then a single cry rang through the silent room, the desolate cry of a breaking heart. And the woman stretched out her arms to the empty air, and fell forward like one dead, before the closed door.

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XVIII

WINGATE never remembered what happened immediately after he left Valerie Drummond's house; he forgot the hour, the whole of his surroundings. He awoke at last to the knowledge that he was the object of everyone's attention, that the shades of evening had already fallen, that everywhere lights were twinkling forth.

He found himself walking swiftly up Oakley Street, then, to the right, along the King's Road. Presently, perhaps because it presented for the moment a less busy appearance, he turned and headed for Sloane Street, and made his way onward, aimlessly, without any particular object in allowing his footsteps to lead him this way.

A shout roused him; his own name called out from a little distance behind, and the voice that called it, to the accompaniment of the slamming open of cab doors, growing rapidly nearer.

"Wingate! Woa—pull up on the right!" And Wingate looked round to find a horse's head almost on his shoulder, and in the hansom behind it, Cuthbert Brabazon waving his stick violently.

"'Pon my word," he said, leaning far forward, "you looked as though you might be thinking you were the only creature on the earth this night."

"Did you yell like a fireman, and have your

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horse nearly sitting on the pavement, to tell me that?"

They were the only words that Wingate's lips could frame—something meaningless was all he had power to say, while he put out his hand and rested it on the shaft with an unconscious movement of detention, while heaviness left mind and body, while the blood suddenly coursed through his veins in little stinging leaps, while his eyes brightened, and his shoulders grew set and square, and the hand that still rested close to the horse clenched hard upon the shaft.

The men's eyes met. There was that in Wingate's sudden eagle glance which brought a puzzled frown to the other's forehead, a flame of passionate hatred, of deadly purpose that, though he was no coward, had the effect of making Brabazon shift uneasily on the edge of the seat.

"What the devil is up?" he inquired. "Upon my soul, Wingate, you're the most beastly bad-tempered chap I know! If I'm hindering you, say so, and I'll get out, but . . ."

"On the contrary, we are well met. I almost think I must have been intending to seek you out when I came this way. I know that, for the first time in my life, I am powerfully glad to see you. Your rooms are only in Knightsbridge, I think? We'll go there."

Brabazon leant back, his easy laugh broken upon by the order Wingate was giving, his languid eyes searching the set white face curiously.

"Gone mad, or been drinking!" was his inward comment, while he rested his arms lightly on the closed doors, and maintained the silence that his companion seemed loth to break. And all the time

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he was conscious of the flame in Wingate's eyes, of the quiver of his whole body, of the heavy breaths that he could hear coming short and sharp.

"Now," said Brabazon, when they had entered his rooms, and when they stood alone, facing each other. "What's the row? You're in a deuce of a rage about something, Wingate, and you look as wild-eyed and worn as though you had not slept for a week. What were you after me for?"

"I am here to tell you—presently. Meantime, I return the question."

"Oh! I only just happened to catch sight of you as I was driving here, and I thought you might be able to tell me something I want to know concerning Pat . . ."

"Whose name, as you are well aware, I will never utter to or hear uttered by you."

"Oh, hang your virtuous airs regarding my wife! Who the deuce are you to sit in judgment upon me? And what part of your business is the affair anyhow?"

"She happens to be a woman who has my deepest affection and respect . . ."

Brabazon interrupted by a savage oath.

"Well, let her have it," he said. "I'm sure I'm not grumbling. But don't give yourself airs about it, and don't start trying to bully me about her. You're not Delmar, you know, old chap. Her—honour—the protection of her name—I fancied," with an insulting shrug, "that those were his affair. . . . Oh, sit down! and keep your fists in your pocket. Do you fancy I'm going to let you come up here and quarrel about Pat with me! I only wanted to ask you, as you've been staying at Delmar yourself, if you'd seen anything of her at Dolly's. She went

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off from town in a huff, and did not leave any address behind. For a wonder, I want her. If you don't choose to tell me, don't—it makes little difference."

Wingate made no reply. After the first involuntary step he had taken in Brabazon's direction, at the mention of Pat's name, he stood still, his shoulders against the mantelpiece, his hands tightly clenched. His eyes never left Brabazon's face, it might have been doubtful if he had heard a word.

"It is for Pat's sake," he said at last, "that you have escaped so long. It is behind her determination that she will have no scandal that you have sheltered too long. Mine is not the right to protect her from you, though the longing has been mine always. I am here to speak of another . . ."

"Another woman!" interrupted Brabazon, in a bored voice. "Oh, Lord! let me alone about women! I say," suddenly rising from the sofa on which he had thrown himself a moment before, "do I begin to see daylight? Do I understand the meaning of your tragic tones, and your terrible looks? What an extraordinary chap you are, Wingate! What have I done? Made love to something—unconsciously—that is your special property?"

"Have you ever heard the name of Valerie Drummond?"

Brabazon started as though he had been shot. For one second his eyes fell before the intent, piercing look of those that never left his face. But only for a second. He recovered himself instantly; a light sneer came to his lips, the old weary expression to his eyes.

"Little Val?" he questioned. "Why, what do you know of her? If she's anything to you now, for

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goodness' sake don't come here raking up the past to bully me about! Jove! I'd forgotten her. There's nothing for you to be so thundering jealous about—if she was mine once. . . . Good Lord! Wingate, you haven't *married* her . . . ?”

The words had hardly passed his lips before Wingate's grasp was upon him, relentless, merciless. His face was livid, his eyes burning. He forced him back in an iron grasp, and shook him from side to side as he might have shaken a dog. Then he dragged him to the opposite side of the room, and took from the wall a riding-whip; and while he held Brabazon there, powerless, in the grip of one hand, he seemed to hear the vows of love that had been breathed by him into Valerie's ears, he seemed to see the caresses that had touched her eyes and hair, and met her lips.

“You are too low to be taught the meaning of honour and dishonour, you are too low to be punished even as one would punish the most miserable, sneaking cur——”

The words died in his throat; rage gave him strength of which he was unconscious; the whip came down upon Brabazon's face and shoulders with such violence that at last snapped it in two. Then Wingate threw him to the other side of the room, where he lay across the hearth, stunned, senseless.

In answer to Wingate's touch upon the bell, Brabazon's man appeared.

“Attend to your master,” he was ordered curtly. “If any desire to hear of me, that is my address,” and throwing down a card before the amazed servant's eyes, he walked quietly out of the room.

The man stood where Wingate left him, looking down on the form of his master that was not a very

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pleasant sight. He did not attempt to touch him for a moment; and then he bent down, with his ear close to Brabazon's lips, his hand above his heart.

"Not me!" he muttered, as if in answer to Wingate's order. "He's best left to come to by himself, and think nobody's the wiser for what has happened, else there'll be no living in the same house with him for the next week!"

The man looked down on the prostrate form for still another minute, listened to the laboured breaths, felt again the beating of the heart, and then, with an expression of something like contempt on his hard face, turned and left the room softly, drawing the door firmly to behind him.

When Brabazon rose from that fall it was half an hour later. The room was but dimly lighted, and there was not a sign of anyone near. All things were blurred before his sight, but with an uncertain movement he groped his way to a small side table, from which he lifted a decanter of brandy with an unsteady hand.

The dose which he poured out was a heavy one, but it brought warmth to his chilled body. Presently he remembered all that had happened, and savage anger took the place of dull bewilderment. He looked round the room again. With a long, satisfied sigh he realised that he was quite alone, and thought it probable that he had been alone since the moment of Wingate's departure. Then Brabazon looked at his watch. Scarcely an hour had passed since both men had entered these rooms together. This was better than he had even dared to hope. Not a soul knew of the thrashing he had just received that he did not dare revenge—not even his man, most likely.

He moved, with more certain step now, to the

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window, which he threw open. He switched off the lights, and then he threw himself down into a big chair and leant his aching head against the cushions, while instinctively his fingers traced the livid weals across his face, and his memory flew back to Valerie Drummond, to the real object of Wingate's presence here to-day. Brabazon had not spoken the truth when he told Wingate that he had forgotten Valerie; he had remembered her as he had never yet remembered any woman; he had striven to find her as he had never yet striven to find anyone or anything; he had regretted her loss, and missed her as he had regretted and missed none; and now he forgot the chastisement he had suffered, in the memory that even through that punishment the means of tracing her might be placed in his hands.

"The world's but a nut-shell after all!" he reflected. "I'll swear she never knew Wingate in my day. They've met since, the transfer of her affections was easy of accomplishment, and if he's married her, well, they've lost no time. But somehow I doubt it. I ought to be able to find her now. Let me see . . . Wingate seems to suggest Delmar—but they couldn't have met there . . . almost impossible. I wonder where he came from to-day? He does not live anywhere near here . . . it's not altogether impossible that he should have come from Chelsea. And he was in a devil of a rage, and was searching for me when I obligingly turned up—or said so."

He sat still for many minutes, deep in thought, fighting for the memory of every little word that had passed between Wingate and himself, his brain active, though his body was still almost with the stillness of stupor.

And by and by he rose to his feet, and was just

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about to switch on the lights and study himself in the mirror, when the door opened.

"Beg pardon, sir," said his man, lying beautifully, "I did not know you were at home, sir. Shall I give any orders about dinner, sir—or——"

"No," returned Brabazon, turning to face him in the full confidence that his features could not be seen. "And I'm not going out. I think I shall go to bed to-night for a change. You can prepare me a hot tub now, Lessing—a very hot one—and quite the last thing, you may leave some iced soup in here, in case I fancy it. Oh, and no matter what happens, I am not to be disturbed."

"I understand, sir."

Ten minutes later Brabazon went through to his sleeping apartment and turned all the lights high.

He was not pleasantly reflected in his mirror; the beauty of the careless, handsome face was greatly marred, and the loss of his beauty was as serious to Brabazon as it would have been to any lovely woman. But he did not shirk examination of the darkened features, of the heavy eyes no longer languid, tender, full of conscious power. He passed his hand again and again over his face, and he spoke to his own image in a whisper.

"Little Val—I might make you pay for these marks, . . . it would be worth a dozen making *him* pay for them, and it would be in a way that, if he really loves you, would go home to his heart with a more stinging cut than his cursed whip went home to my flesh!"

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XIX

A SCORCHING summer's night, a heavy mist hanging over all the city, a narrow, badly lighted, gloomy street, with small houses of the lower "lodging" type on one side, and dingy, cheap flats on the other—flats where all the windows stood wide open, and many of the sills were decorated with jugs or basins put out to cool—and down the street a woman moving languidly.

From behind the open windows there came to her ears various sounds—of music, of laughter, of the clatter of china, the jingle of glass, the hiss of something frying fiercely in a pan. It was all familiar to her, as familiar as the occupants of the building which she now entered. Artists, musicians, models, actresses, dancers, a few who gave instruction—all unknown, all fighting for the bare means of livelihood.

She rather dragged herself than walked up the long flights of stone stairs to the very top floor; and there she paused to put her key into the right-hand door.

Shouts of welcome, perhaps a little impatient, rose to greet her.

"Back at last! What a time you've been, Val! Bogie was on the point of fetching you!"

Miss Drummond laughed down upon the speakers,

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much as a mother might laugh down on a noisy crew of children. There were three of them, men—one lying idly at full length on a cane sofa, another correcting manuscript, the third at the piano.

"I am late," she admitted contritely, "Valdor was hard to please to-day, or I was stupid. Then that bit of storm came up and spoilt the light, and he lost his temper a little, and—bah! we spent half the sitting quarrelling."

One took her hat, another her gloves, and the man who had been at the piano, and silent, came forward and pressed her back into the only good chair the room boasted. Then he went to the sideboard and poured out a glass of rich red wine from a bottle that was light enough to bring a soft sigh to his lips.

"Your head aches?" he asked, as he put the glass into her hand.

"Very little—the storm, you know, and the heat. It has been a horrible day. How you spoil me!" swallowing the wine gratefully, and looking over the rim of the glass with lovely tired eyes into his kind, anxious face.

"Don't!" he pleaded, pushing her chair with her in it to the farther window, and seating himself on the inner ledge. "Don't. Spoil you! I can't stand much more of this, Val—I can't see you dying by inches before our very eyes. I won't. If only," moving restlessly, "I can put this work through, if I can get Crampton's ear for an hour, and make him listen to it himself—if he'd accept it even for a distant date, and give me something on account, I'd bundle you off to the sea in double quick time."

"Old goose!" Valerie smiled, but the great tears were in her eyes, tears of gratitude and love, and miserable weakness. "You persist in thinking me ill

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because I have a white face—all red-headed people have!—and you talk as though I were unhappy.”

“And you are.” He glanced across the long room, but one of the men had gone out, and the other was deep in his work. “Do you think I have not known it since the first hour of your life here, since the first day you came . . .”

“Four months ago.”

“Four months of torture, of life that has offended you at every turn; four months of hidden, silent revolt.”

“You are unjust to yourselves,” she began.

“I am not. We love you, but we’ve got to watch you work. We’d screen you if we could, but we’re so hopelessly powerless—such poor struggling beggars. We can’t shut our eyes to the fact that the best part of your days is spent half clothed in draughts—half starved . . . God! don’t you see what the torture of that is to us—to those who owe almost all to dear old Drummy.”

“And can’t *you* see that I ought to be more at home here than anywhere? Was not all my youth, were not all my happiest days spent in such a life as this?”

“No; they were spent among us; but the hard times you were too young to understand, you’d your father then, and during the years that alone count with you you have known every luxury.”

He spoke truth, and Valerie knew it—during the only years that counted with her she had known only happiness and luxury. He spoke the truth—the last four months had been months of torture, of slowly fading health, of hidden, silent revolt. But she would not admit it to this man, one of the three who had stretched out welcoming, helping hands to her, one of

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the three who had been her father's special favourites, and who, when their turn had come, hailed it proudly, and threw wide their door to her.

"You are unjust to yourselves," she repeated, "and if it is in your mind that you owed father a debt of gratitude, you may rest assured you are the only three who have tried to pay it, and you have paid it a thousand times in your care of me."

He shook his head dubiously. "You wouldn't—I suppose you couldn't go back to—to—those old women, your aunts?"

Valerie leant back in the chair without answering for several moments, and the man saw that her face went, if possible, whiter, that a little spasm of acute pain passed over it, and that her breast heaved unevenly with shortly-drawn breaths.

"Forgive me!" he said swiftly. "And don't, for heaven's sake, think that we *want* you to go. I know it must have been bad enough there, they . . ."

She silenced him with a little gesture, which he obeyed, because he knew that she was distressed.

"The fault was not theirs, and you must not blame them," she said presently. "Because I came to you immediately after leaving them, because I was unhappy and without friends, you must not think it was their fault. You know I left them to take a post which they had found for me, and, you know," with a little smile, "that I never took it! I came here instead. I went away to a new home, and perhaps you think I forgot you all, but it was not so. I—I cannot explain fully—after all it does not matter much—but when I went to the home they—father's sisters—offered me, it was because I wanted to start anew in life. I—I—had good reason. I wanted to leave my old world behind—not because

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I did not love it—and go out into a fresh one. And it was a failure. Fate was not good to me. I tried to do what was right, and I meant to be true, but right and truth cut the ground from under my feet, and left me how much done, how wholly deserted you know. And I came to you, and, as I knew you would, you held out your hands to me, without a thought of *why* I came, without a question. Well, you've made life endurable, you've saved me from I dare not think what; and you've let me work among you and with you, and helped me to laugh with you at adversity, and make merry over a crust as we did in the old days when luck was down for father. Don't spoil it by letting me think I distress you, that I am a worry to you; and don't ever speak again of—of—sending me away. I'll work with you and share with you, but I'll not see you sacrifice your work to the first wily bidder, just that you may get the means of providing unnecessary luxuries for me. Remember that, Bogie; if you do, I swear that I don't budge from here, and what you bring me I'll pitch out of the window."

The man was silent. He had watched every varying expression of her face while she had been speaking, he had listened intently to every inflection of her soft voice. Always he had suspected a sorrow at her heart, which she would for ever hide there, in these last few minutes he had become sure of it. He fell to wondering, but he was not going to ruin her confidence in him by letting her think that he wondered.

"I wish you were stronger," he said lamely.

"Poof! I tell you it is the colour of my skin that makes you fancy I am ill."

Then she got up and moved lightly about the

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room, and hummed little snatches of song, as though to prove to him that her heart was gay.

"Where have they gone?" she asked presently, nodding to the empty places where the other men had been sitting.

"I'm not quite sure, but they both spoke of being late."

"And you?"

"I'm going to talk over this business with Crampton's people, and let them hear the second act," pointing to the sheets of an unfinished score.

"And don't part with it for nothing, Bogie. The music is all right—they won't match it easily, but in my opinion it is the book that wants polishing up."

"I believe you're right, Val. You won't sit up?" he added, putting the score together, and wrapping it in a sheet of well used brown paper.

"No, indeed! If the boys even hint at being late, and you are going to play the second act, I know it means five to-morrow morning. I shall hope to be thinking of breakfast then."

She fetched his hat out of the little hall, passed her handkerchief round the band, and then went with him to the door, her arm linked in his. Then with a hearty wish for good luck, she watched him down the stairs.

Her room was at the opposite side of the landing, separate from the flat; but she did not go into it. She went back, instead, to the big room she had just left, and looked down with a little smile upon the litter that the men had left behind. Only her fingers might gather up sheets of music paper, only she might arrange the scattered bits of a particular chapter, only her hands could move palette and brush without damage. And now she set to work upon the

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rather thankless task of tidying up, moving slowly as one heavy with fatigue, yet glad of occupation.

All that "The Bogie" had said to her just now was fresh in her mind, all the truth, and hopelessness, and the misery of it. Every day, every hour told her more surely that all her old bravery was gone, that there was no life, no spirit in her wherewith to fight the present, from which she might gain courage to look into the future.

The never-ceasing pain at her heart, the ever-present futile regret, the memory of all that might have been hers, and all that she had lost, had told pitilessly upon her during these long summer days. She knew that her health was failing, and she hailed its failure gladly. Of what use to her was life? She had aided its ruin at the outset; she would have to pay the price of her folly until her last hour should come.

And more than ever, to-night, she wished that that hour might be near.

Her task over, she drew near to the open window, lifting her face to the haze above in a vain endeavour to catch a breath of air. On the right someone was singing, well, but with the monotonous repetition of the same four bars, in hard practice. From below there came to her offended nostrils the smell of sausages briskly frying. In a room opposite, a baby cried incessantly; and down in the street a dog, that had been shut out, whined at intervals.

Valerie threw out her arms wildly, as though she had no room to move, no space in which to breathe. Life was so empty, so hideous, so sordid. With deception she might have purchased all that the world would envy her, she might have bought at least a few months, perhaps a year or two of joy—joy for even a year of which a woman might have given

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her soul. She might have bought it, and she might have given it—with deception. With truth, with honesty she had wrecked her own life and another that had been all hers to make or mar. Had she marred it? Was it as wasted, as useless as hers? Had he forgotten? She tortured herself with the hope that he had—with the thought that forgetfulness would be possible to him.

A flood of memory swept her back into the past; weakness and misery drove the tears to her eyes and down her white cheeks. All the nights of the last four months had been more than half spent in tears that through the days she forced back, in weeping that left her weary and unrefreshed when morning came, and that she knew was powerless to wash out the one hour that she would have put out of her life, or at least out of memory.

And while her head rested limply upon her outstretched arms, the baby opposite still cried on, the dog below whined piteously, the woman practised her scales with irritating persistence, and though the sausages had ceased to frizzle, the smell of their fat remained on the heavy air.

Life was indeed hideous and sordid. Truth was folly, tears were unavailing. Perhaps she wept her heart out for one who had already forgotten. Only the thought of death held any hope; and that might be so far off.

A slight touch upon the bell roused her. It would be quite a stranger who pressed it. The inmates of this flat had their keys, and their special calls or whistles. Tradesmen did not come here even by day, certainly not at night.

The bell sounded again, a little more impatiently; and Valerie, dashing the tears from her eyes, and

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remembering comfortably that the passage was unlighted, went to the door.

A man stood there whose face she could not see.

"Miss Drummond?" he inquired.

"Yes; I am Miss Drummond."

A little cry of alarm left her lips as he stepped boldly in, closing the door behind him, a little cry that was repeated in the light of the room into which she had swiftly backed, as she looked up into eyes so well remembered, that smiled down into hers now, tenderly, delightedly, triumphantly.

"Val!" he said softly, taking her nerveless, unresisting hands into his. "For half a year have I tried in vain to find you—for half a long, miserable year, and pure accident, only to-day, gave me a clue to your whereabouts. Val, have I frightened you, or? . . ."

Then Valerie recovered her voice, and released her hands, and stood well back from him, leaning a little against the window casement for support.

"I think you have made a mistake, Mr Brabazon," she said coldly, but not at all calmly.

"And I know that I have done nothing of the sort. I heard your name to-day, I heard that you were living here, I came to find you, and I *have* found you! Be very sure you will not escape me again—be certain that no command, no plea of yours will drive me out of your life a second time! Val, Val! has your tender heart cherished anger against me all these long months? I won't believe it—I won't believe it any more than I will believe that so sweet a thing as our love—is dead."

She stood before him, trembling, too weak to move, not daring to trust her voice, the tears still wet on her lashes and face, a short sob, like the sob

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of a troubled child, catching her breath every now and again.

Brabazon was at her side in a moment, he had drawn her from the window, and with his usual presence of mind dropped the blind. He held her in an embrace from which, had she been in possession of her full strength, it would have been useless to try to escape, and he tilted her little worn face up to the light, while he bent his own close to it, and let his handsome, weary eyes mark carefully every line that suffering had stamped upon it.

"What a little fool you've been, Val—what a little fool! When with a word you could have brought me to your side, you have chosen to live in this den," casting a rapid, contemptuous glance round the room, "to ruin your beauty, and pose for Valdor at a few shillings a day! Were you mad? Were you mad?—to hide from me when you knew that I asked no more than to surround you with every luxury, to fill your life with happiness and love."

He brushed his lips over the loosened waves of her hair, and over her half-closed eyes; and then, with a long sigh of satisfaction, would have laid them to her own. With an enormous effort she threw her head as far back as it would go, with her free hand she covered her mouth; but Brabazon only laughed, and took away the weak little fingers and held them round his throat, and kissed her lips at will. "The one moment worth living," he said, when he lifted his head at last, "since we parted."

But he spoke to deaf ears; he realised that her frail body had grown heavy in his hold, he saw that her eyes were closed, and knew that she had lost consciousness.

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"The devil!" he muttered under his breath; and then, with something like horror, "she does not weigh more than a kitten."

He put her down on the cane sofa, and pulled an old pillow under her head. He knew she did not live here alone, but from the moment of his entrance he had not given a thought to whom he might meet here. He concluded that he and she were, for the moment at all events, sole occupants of this particular flat; and his eyes left her still form to search round the room for cupboard or table where he might find brandy. He searched in vain. Then he stepped out into the passage and struck a match from his pocket. There were three doors opposite, and he opened them one after another. They were doors to bedrooms, all unmistakably the bedrooms of men. At the end of the passage there was a kitchen, which boasted little furniture, a sleepy cat, and a small larder, quite empty.

Brabazon struck some more matches and swore under his breath. He went back to the sitting-room and found Valerie just as he had left her; and he fell to gently chafing her cold hands. He would not leave her, even in search of restoratives; the temptation came to him to take her from here now, when it would be without her knowledge, when she would be powerless to resist him, but difficulties presented themselves to his mind that he saw no way of overcoming. To send someone from below for a cab, and then to walk down five flights of stairs with an unconscious woman in his arms, would probably cause as great a sensation as a fire. It was not to be thought of, almost resistless as was the temptation.

He was beginning to grow impatient when Valerie stirred.

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"Better, little girl?" he asked cheerfully, and with something in his voice that, in spite of herself, she found as almost comforting. She struggled into a sitting posture.

"I—I—am all right, please go."

He pressed her gently back as she would have risen, and stood looking down at her.

"Look here, Val, I don't want to upset or worry you—I swear I don't. I've never rested till I found you, and you can't expect me to be calmly ordered out of your presence now I have done so. But I wouldn't make you unhappy for the world—I wouldn't do anything you didn't wish. I—you were angry with me just now, and I ought to have remembered that you were not likely to forgive me at once. But I swear, if you will just listen to me quietly, I won't say another word to offend. I won't ask for one kind word till you give me leave. I love you better to-day than I ever loved you, and even though you care no longer for me, you'll be just enough to admit, giving one glance back into the past, that I've the right to stand your friend. No, listen a moment more. There are any amount of things I want to say to you, that you would not give me a chance to say when we parted, many things that you must hear. But for heaven's sake let us get out of this. The place is simply stifling—to think of you in it! No wonder you're white as a lily and thin as its stalk. Can't you put on a hat and come out for a little while—anywhere that isn't this place—it is not ten yet."

She put her hand up to bid him be silent.

"I don't doubt, in fact I believe that you mean well—now," she said, getting to her feet and leaning against the table, "but you don't understand. I—

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want nothing—no friends other than those here. I left your world and mine long ago, and all I ask now is to be forgotten by it—and you.”

“That is sheer nonsense, Val. You did not leave it—I drove you from it. I’ve had six months of misery and anxiety about you, and you owe it to me to let me make what little amends I can now. Be reasonable dear, I tell you—I swear to you that I ask nothing but to be your friend, to make your life a little happier, a little easier. Don’t try to tell me you are content, because I won’t believe it. Don’t you suppose I can see that you are so ill you can hardly stand? Don’t you suppose I know what you must have gone through to come down to living in this place and being Valdor’s model! Good God! if you were to die to-morrow I should feel like your murderer.”

She shook her head, not angrily but sadly.

“You don’t understand,” she said again. “If I died I think my death would be at your door; whatever ill had befallen me you would be to blame. Then, six months ago, I thought you killed life, and love, and hope, and belief in me. But you did not—I wish you had—you only drove me to seek another world—and there I learnt that what I thought was dead in me lived still, but that because of you, love and happiness must pass me for ever on the other side.”

“Ah!” the single word left Brabazon’s lips with some tone in it that told her how fully he comprehended all her words conveyed, and he turned his eyes from hers a moment, lest she should read too much in them. And presently he moved nearer, and stood before her very humbly. “Perhaps, after all, I am more faithful than the rest,” he said. “At least my love is strong enough to make me regret the

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wrong I did you, to fill me with the desire to atone, if atonement be possible. At least it had been strong enough to keep me at your side, not so weakly a thing that I could be driven from you by a confession that you and you alone could have made. It is a poor love that holds no pardon."

She shuddered. It was her own thought—a thought continually forced aside—put into words, and words which somehow lessened her bitter resentment against the speaker, and hardened her heart ever so little against the man who had forsaken her.

"Val," he went on gently, quick to perceive his advantage, slight though it might be, "I only ask you to let me be your friend—not for my sake but for your own, I ask you to let me make the way a little easier if I can . . ."

"No; I don't know how you found me here, but I am sorry that you did."

"I want to tell you about that—about many things," he interrupted eagerly. "Won't you get your hat now and come out? Good heavens! You fainted just now, and there was nothing in this wretched hole that I could get you. Will you come away from it to-morrow, then? Let me get you rooms at a hotel. I swear I won't set foot in them unless you bid me. Let me know, at least, that you are well looked after, that . . ."

"Don't say any more. You mean well. I tell you I believe that, but it is all useless. I do not wish to leave here. I wish only that you will leave me now, and that you will forget you have found me."

"And I tell you I can't do that. I won't."

She made a little gesture that expressed utter weariness, utter hopelessness.

"Well, if you will not go, I shall," she said. "I

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leave you in possession of this room. When the boys return you can explain your presence here."

And before he knew what she was going to do, she had passed swiftly through the passage and out on to the outer landing. But, quick as she was, he was quicker, and he overtook her as she was about to pass through a doorway on the other side.

"Val, listen—I'll go—now, this moment; but promise you will let me see you to-morrow."

"No."

"What is this place?" thinking it better to argue no further, and looking at the half-open door.

"These are my own rooms. Good-night."

"Well, let me come and see you here to-morrow . . ."

"No. Good-bye."

And she slipped through the narrow opening, and closed the door, not roughly, but decidedly, in his face.

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XX

THREE days passed without Brabazon following up his visit by another, three days through which Valerie lived with ears strained for the sound of a strange footfall on the stone landing outside, with eyes continually searching the narrow pavement immediately below her own windows.

She knew well enough that Brabazon was not the man to accept his dismissal easily. She did not doubt his statement that he had spent six months in an endeavour to find her. His efforts in that direction might have been intermittent, the search might have lost its interest after a time; but there was sufficient obstinacy, determination, persistence underlying his calm indolence to render him patient, even in long waiting, for anything upon which he set his heart and mind.

He had found her,—whether by accident or through careful search she neither knew nor cared,—and, it was not likely that he would be willing to pass out of her life once more, simply because she had told him to go, and had shut her door in his face. He had found her, and he had not sought her again since that night, three nights ago, nor sent her a written word.

And another day and still another went by, till a week had gone, but Valerie listened in vain. She searched the street with troubled eyes, only to see

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her usual neighbours coming and going, and rarely a stranger enter it from one direction or the other.

All peace there might have been in her life seemed to have fled when once more she heard Brabazon's voice, when again she had felt the touch of his hands and his lips, when, after all these days, she and he met, and she had read triumph and satisfaction and passion, and something else that she could not understand, in the eyes that could so well speak tender meaning straight to a woman's heart. All peace and rest had fled, just when she was beginning to settle down wearily, apathetically, to the monotony and the poverty and the dreariness of the life that she had deliberately chosen.

Her "boys" looked at her under their eyelids in ever-increasing fear; they said in their own hearts what they had not the courage to put into words,—even to each other. They said that she was dying by inches, and making a brave fight to hide the fact from them to the very last; and they thrust their hands into their empty pockets, and let their eyes rest on the work that swallowed up the colourless days, the endless nights, the work that was always returned after long delay that roused false hope, returned with meaningless "Regrets," or tossed aside without a glance, the work on which all their youth was spent, and knew with only the bitterness that such knowledge can hold, that they were powerless even to try to save her.

Valerie was alone one evening when the "Bogie" returned unexpectedly early. She heard him racing up the stone stairs three at a time, she heard his fingers fumble nervously with the latch of the door, she caught the sound of his quickly-drawn breaths as he entered the little passage; and when he came

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into the room, she saw that it was with springing step, with eyes alight, with trembling lips that he strove hard, shamefacedly, to steady. His pockets were bulging with parcels, under his arm was a neatly packed box, in his hands flowers—roses, carnations, lilies, mignonette. He threw them into her lap, and silenced her quickly before she could utter a protest.

"Don't scold, Val—Ford bought that little duet I did for him and his wife, and, what is more remarkable, paid for it!" he said, in simple explanation.

"Bogie! That means a couple of pounds at the utmost, and you have . . ."

"Don't be insulting, Miss Drummond! It meant three pounds ten, and I've been reckless with it, I admit! But that's not all the news—I could afford to be reckless. Little one, as sure as I'm a sinner I believe the luck's turned!" With a boyish laugh he seated himself on the window sill and took one of her little hands into his, while he smoothed the pallid back of it with tender fingers. "I'll tell you all about it—it won't keep. I met Ford in Valdor's studio to-day, when I dropped in to tell him you were not well enough to turn up."

"He was annoyed?" uneasily.

"No, only sorry. Well, I met Ford there; he was at his wits' ends for a good duet for this piece they're taking on tour. I humbly suggested one of mine—one that he'd snubbed me about. I played it, put something into it that he and she will never find in the copy; and, in short, made a hit. He took it there and then, and paid. I orchestrate it; he finds the band parts. You know what Valdor is when once he gets one at the piano, he kept me there two hours, and at last I found that Ford had disappeared, and some other chap had come in and

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had been listening all the time. He was a very decent sort of chap, too, and evidently a music lover. He seemed particularly interested after he had got at my name and address, and intimated that he was on the look-out for the music for a good musical comedy. Apparently he has the book cut and dried. Valdor encouraged him to give me the commission, but he did not seem to want much encouragement. He said there could not be much delay about it; suggested possible terms that nearly stood my hair on end, and made an appointment to come up here to-night and hear some of my unrecognised work. Too good an opportunity to miss, eh, Val? So I asked him to come along about eight, but he'd an engagement, and in the end we made it any time after ten. I knew you'd not mind, little woman . . ."

"Mind! Oh, Bogie, if you only knew how glad I am! You're right, luck is changing, perhaps. But I always said your music had only to be *heard*."

Bogie smiled. He took the flowers from her and put them into two vases—one close to her elbow, and then he set himself to open the various packages.

"A bottle or two of whisky and a few cigars, you know," he said, half apologetically. "Must not let the fellow into the secret of our immediate impecuniosity—lowers prices at once. 'To him that hath, etc.' And a little cold fodder in case we feel the pangs of hunger before midnight. Meantime there are a few things in this parcel which you are to consume by degrees yourself."

He dropped it into her lap as he spoke, and went out of the room, perhaps to avoid thanks, perhaps because he could not bear to see the tears filling her sweet eyes.

Valerie sighed. She stared out on to the hot roofs

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opposite, but there was a little touch of hope in the smile that played about her mouth. If luck had turned! If, after all the long weary waiting, the Bogie's talent was to be recognised at last, if he was on the fair road to make his name and his fortune!

The long sultry evening crept slowly away. Valerie made tea very late, and she and the Bogie sat chatting over it while she helped him gladly to build castles in the air. They were alone here to-night, and they did not trouble about the lights.

The sun sank away below the horizon, the little crescent of the moon rose clear in an opal sky. Over the opposite house-tops Valerie watched it, while the darkness gradually fell;—and against her will her memory went back, as on such a night as this it would fight its way back out of her control, to the cliff path above her aunts' house, to the stretch of sea before her, as it had been then, to the sombre land behind, that had ever seemed like a shadow creeping up to envelop her.

And over the sound of the melancholy wash of the waves, above the high wind, there rose the sound of Wingate's voice, not as she had heard it last, harsh with suffering, bitter with disappointment, but as it came to her so often in her dreams, soft with tenderness that she alone ever heard it, lingering like a caress on the utterance of her name.

She turned her white face to the shadow, and clenched her hands in the folds of her dress till the nails cut through it and into her palms; and Bogie, thinking she slept, crept softly about the room, preparing it for the reception of his visitor to-night.

But in her heart Valerie was praying wildly, senselessly, "Oh, God, give me one hour, one day of his

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love, of the happiness that was mine then, and let me die!"

The clock was striking nine when there was a knock at the hall door. The Bogie hurried out to open it, and Valerie rose from her reclining position in the biggest chair in the room. There was a touch of excitement upon her; she felt that this might be the turning-point in the life of one of her boys, and it was consequently a moment of no mean importance.

She heard the Bogie's cheery greeting, she did not catch any reply. Bogie was apologising for the darkness, and explaining that the heat made gas almost intolerable; and while he explained, he brought the visitor straight towards Valerie's chair.

"Val, dear, this is Mr Brabazon," he said, "of whom I have been telling you. Mr Cuthbert Brabazon—Miss Drummond. If you did not know John Drummond the artist personally," he added, "you must have known him by reputation. This lady is his daughter."

Valerie blessed the darkness. She knew that if she looked white in the faint light of the moon, it would not be surprising. The scantily furnished room, the figures of the men danced a jig before her eyes; everything was going round, and she was clinging with her left hand to the back of her chair. Her right one Brabazon had taken, and was holding closely, fondly, in a clasp from which she was powerless to extricate it.

"This is indeed an unexpected pleasure," he said, with evident delight. "Long ago, perhaps so long that she will not remember, I had the honour of meeting Miss Drummond. Mr Dunbar," turning to address the Bogie with a little laugh, "if you had told me that, beside your delightful music, the

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renewal of my acquaintance with Miss Drummond awaited me, be very sure I should have been here two hours sooner! Ah, please do not light the gas on my account. If I may have a choice, I like this light so much more than a glare, in so much heat, anyhow. And I'll wager you want little light for your work at the piano."

"Not much," agreed Bogie; but he was straining his eyes to see Valerie, who still stood with her hand in Brabazon's, and whose lips refused to form a syllable.

"You had forgotten me," declared Brabazon, releasing her fingers, and waiting till she sank into her chair to be seated himself close by her.

"I am afraid I had," she forced herself to reply; and the Bogie experienced a momentary feeling of keen disappointment. He had counted so upon Valerie. She was always so sweet and natural and kindly to anyone of their friends, no matter whom they might bring up to this room. She made all welcome; and now to this one man, whose good opinion was worth winning, who might be of the greatest help, who bid fair to be a friend indeed as in need, she was icily cold. She had even known him, but the Bogie could not blame her for not telling him so when he remembered that he had not mentioned Brabazon's name. To his great relief it was plain that Brabazon was not in the least offended, not in the least snubbed by her chilly reply. He drew his chair a little closer, and at once started a rather one-sided conversation with her. And what Bogie did not know, but Valerie did, was that the visitor was giving her time to fully recover herself. What the Bogie did not see, and Valerie did, was that a little smile of eyes and

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mouth, a self-satisfied smile, was lighting up the visitor's handsome features, and the sound of merriment making itself pleasantly heard through his very attractive voice.

"And now for the music, Mr Dunbar," he said. "May I ask for that number which so delighted Valdor to-day? That for the introduction; and afterwards all three acts of this new work which I very much look forward to having a share in."

Bogie went to the piano at once. He tried to meet Valerie's eyes first, but failed utterly; and then he lighted the small piano lamp, and commenced the opening bars of the little graceful air that had pleased Valdor and Brabazon to-day.

The room was a large one; it took up more than half the little flat, indeed, and when once the Bogie was safely at the piano, which stood in the corner farthest from Valerie and the visitor, when once his fingers were running with their firm, sure touch over the keys, Brabazon leant forward, and under cover of the semi-darkness, closed gentle fingers upon her reluctant arm, under sway of the tender melody, leant nearer to whisper in her ear.

"Did you think I had forgotten? Did you fancy that I had taken your last words to me in the spirit you intended? Why, I have been laying little plans all through this week which have led to my presence here to-night. You wonder at it? You would not let me tell you a week ago, and I cannot very well now. Val, say where you will meet me to-morrow? Do. If you don't, I shall come here every day and every night till you do. Dunbar and I are tremendous friends already. I can be of any amount of use to him, and he will not be likely to keep me out of these rooms—so . . ."

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"Be quiet," she whispered back.

"Not till you have promised to meet me somewhere to-morrow."

She leant farther back in the chair, keeping her arm out of his reach now, and her eyes on the Bogie's back. Argument was impossible; she felt sure that Brabazon intended to make refusal almost as impossible. She was trapped, cornered, powerless to resist him unless she said or did something which might rouse suspicion in young Dunbar's mind. Moreover, it came to her that it would be as well to get this interview which Brabazon insisted upon over, once and for ever; and, beyond that, it might be well for her to know how and where he had received information concerning her whereabouts.

"Very well, to-morrow," she said, still not looking at him.

"Good little girl! Where—what time?"

She shrugged her shoulders with maddening indifference, which he chose to turn instantly to his own account.

"I shall send the night brougham—no, not here—to the corner of Oakley Street, the Embankment end, at six o'clock. You can manage that little walk, and the heat of the day will have died down by that time."

Then, without giving her a moment in which to reply, he got up abruptly and went over to the piano.

As in a dream she heard his voice mingling with the Bogie's, and little snatches of softly-played music; as though she looked at them through the wrong end of a pair of opera-glasses, the men appeared to her eyes far, far off; as if held down by iron hands, she lay very still in her chair,

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incapable of action of any sort. She seemed to see through all Brabazon's plans; she knew now what she had never guessed, that he was a friend of Valdor's; she understood that he would be a friend of the Bogie's before long, that he would contrive to weave part of his life in with the life she led with the boys here, that she could not shun him without perhaps injuring at least the Bogie's prospects. She knew that she had but to breathe one word in young Dunbar's ear, and he would tear up the score and fling it in Brabazon's face, before he would enter into any business transaction with him; she knew she had but to let her eyes speak, and the door of this, their poor little home, would be slammed in Brabazon's face for ever, no matter at what cost. And she knew that with only that end in view she must ever keep silence.

After all, what was her life compared to theirs—the young, opening lives of her boys? Hers was ruined, done with long ago—theirs was but just beginning. And it was Brabazon who would be the means of starting young Dunbar on the road to fame. Truly, Fate had a grudge against her; truly, tortures long drawn out were to be her portion through life.

And looking at the man leaning against the top of the piano, looking back into the past, she told herself, as she had told him once, that most of the blame lay at her own door.

It was very late before Brabazon took his leave; and but that he kept almost strictly to business, that he scarcely allowed Dunbar to leave the piano, and that he talked a good deal himself, Valerie's silence would have been remarkable.

When the door had closed behind him, and

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Dunbar had called out a last good-night, the boy came back into the room, a frown in his eyes, a ring of real perplexity in his voice as he spoke to Valerie.

"It amazes me," he declared, bringing his hand down fiercely on the table. "How often have I brought up here a poor little wretch that I may have found in an attic starving, and you have been sweetness and hospitality and kindness itself to him; and to-night I bring a man who is not only prepared to give me work and pay handsomely for it, but one who will be likely to fling me up the ladder of fame two rungs at a time if the fancy but take him. Heaven knows why or what his caprice—but it is there. And you turn from him as if he were the scum of the earth, you hold aloof, you are barely civil. Why? In God's name, why? Val."

She kept silence for a moment, then she took a few steps which brought her close to him.

"I am sorry," she said. "I was dull, I own, but I do not think you need fear it making any difference, Bogie. I—am not very well . . ."

With a quick movement Dunbar seized one of the candles and held it above her head; the next moment he had thrown both his arms round her.

"Val, forgive me—what a brute—what an utter selfish brute I am! Val . . ."

She forced a laugh, she took his anxious, distressed young face between both her cold little hands.

"Don't call yourself names. I shall be all right to-morrow. And go to bed, Bogie, and dream that you are climbing that ladder and fast reaching the top!"

"You will have to see a doctor now, Val," he insisted.

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"What! A doctor? Not I! I prefer to see you in the conductor's chair, and to hear the house yelling your name from pit to gallery."

When he was alone, Dunbar threw himself down in Valerie's chair. He thought over the day's work with hope that he hardly dared to encourage, with wonder that drove sleep away, with excitement that set the blood tingling in his veins.

Luck had changed, fortune had come his way, perhaps, at last.

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XXI

VALERIE had her home almost entirely to herself during the next day. Her usual companions had business which kept them away from mid day, and young Dunbar's time was to be fully occupied throughout the evening.

Valerie smiled to herself. She thought how like Brabazon it was to provide against any chance of his own plans meeting with interference. To the best of his ability he had cleared the way for her, so that she might be able to leave her home and keep her appointment with him without comment and without explanation.

When six was striking she drew up the blinds, left a note on the table in case one of the boys should arrive home before her, and then, simply drawing to the door of the little flat, made her way down into the street and through a few of the narrow back ones leading to the Embankment.

At the corner of Oakley Street she saw a waiting brougham; when she got nearer it was plain to her that the servant occupying the box-seat was one well known to her.

He moved the horse onward at a walk so that he might meet her, and touched his hat respectfully, and without the ghost of expression of any sort upon his face. But Valerie, with annoyance, knew that the colour had crept into her cheeks.

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She opened the door of the brougham swiftly, felt that it snapped to at scarcely a touch, and then that she was being drawn rapidly through the streets. It was a pleasant sensation. This mode of progression was so much more inviting than any she had known during the last few months. It took her back to her better days, and all the luxury that had been hers; and she was surprised to catch herself leaning back with closed eyes, rather enjoying her journey than experiencing the half indignation, half reluctance that she told herself she ought to have experienced now.

She guessed by the direction in which she was being driven that she was being taken to Brabazon's rooms. It was as well; she would have gone to no public place with him—he knew that, perhaps,—and she would not walk about the streets with him like a housemaid with a soldier.

A week or two ago she would have hesitated, most likely declined, to see him at all; but to-day, as all through the last seven days, it seemed to her that nothing mattered. It had only been when once more Brabazon had come unexpectedly into her life that she had realised how weary she was after her long fight, that she had understood that, strive as she might, it was evidently meant that escape from someone, some part of the old life, would never be hers, that forgetfulness was denied her, that to start out on any fresh path was out of her power.

Brabazon had told her last night that all through the last week—during which she had hoped against hope that he had accepted her dismissal—he had been laying plans. They were plans against her, plans which she was as powerless to stand against now as she had ever been. And now, to-day, she

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had not even her old courage left to her, not even her old strength.

The rattle of the wheels and the clatter of the horse's hoofs on the stone paving of the courtyard, which lay well back from the road, and at one corner of which the building that held Brabazon's rooms stood, roused her from thought.

A moment more and the wide glass doors facing her were thrown open. One uniformed servant held them back, another opened the brougham door—in the eyes of both she read instant recognition. Another, in charge of the lift, took her straight to the floor above, and left her, without request, outside Brabazon's rooms.

And when the door to them opened, Lessing, Brabazon's own man, stood behind it, ready to escort her over familiar ground to a room that she saw at a glance was changed in no way, that was heavy with the scent of flowers which, from their bank in the fireplace to the over-laden window-boxes, stood everywhere in profusion.

Alone, she leant against the embrasure of the window, her eyes on the awnings whose festooned edges flapped gently in the faint, hot breeze, her mind in a blind tangle, through which it was clear only to her that she was struggling vainly to awake from a disturbing dream, her hands nervously, unconsciously, snapping off the innocent heads of those geraniums nearest them.

Brabazon's entrance did not rouse her; it was only when he stood at her side, when he took the restless fingers into his own, and with fond, gentle touch stripped them of their suede covering, when close to her ear he murmured words of pleasure, of thanks to her that she had not failed him, that

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she seemed to struggle out of the lingering, heavy dream.

"So you came after all," he said, clasping her hands more tightly. "Do you know, Val, my heart was in my mouth every time I heard wheels on the yard below! First, I was maddened with the fear that you might be ill—you looked such a little ghost last night,—and then that you might have given into a fit of repentance of your bargain. But," with a long sigh, "you're here, and that is all I care about for the moment. Let me look at you," pushing her a very little away, and running an appreciative pair of fond eyes over her from her feet to the crown of her hat. "All white, of course, it was always all white or all black. You're too thin, Val, and you look tired out, but, by heaven! you always were, and always will be, the loveliest thing on God's earth. Here is your chair, your old one, Val! No one else has ever sat in it! Now, haven't you one word for me?"

He put her gently into a great chair drawn close to the window, and heaped up with wide, lace-covered cushions; he caught up another from the floor and set it beneath her feet, not forgetting to kiss the little insteps that showed pink through the open lace-work of her stockings; and then he looked up in some surprise as Val burst into a sudden hysterical peal of laughter, not loud, not even amused. It was laughter that held all tears, and some fear.

"I was thinking," she said, striving wildly for self-control, "that since I left home I have not spoken one word . . ."

"Then it is time you spoke several—the first, to tell me that you are not angry with me, that you do not mind my having brought you here—that . . ."

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"It has been like a pantomime scene," she pursued, as if he had not spoken; "the brougham waiting for me, the doors thrown open here to me—this room—all . . ."

"Like old times, Val—like those days long ago—those days, and nights, that were all our own. I wanted to remind you of them, Val." He leant down to her, resting one knee on the broad arm of her chair, and took first her gloves and then her flower-covered hat, and drew in his breath sharply, and slid his arm between the cushions and her back, as he read no signs of resistance in her eyes or the movement of her body.

Brabazon was very wise; no living man understood woman better than he; his hold upon her remained loose, gentle, protecting. He held in check an almost overpowering desire to crush her in his arms, to kiss the little cool face at will, to hold her captive while he whispered to her of what she must know—her powerlessness against him. But he did none of these things; instead, with every word, with every touch he roused within her, half against her will, a sense of confidence, a feeling of very pleasant restfulness.

Presently he drew a chair near to hers, and folding a sheet of paper into the shape of a fan, gently stirred the air with it.

"I want to know," she said, "how you found me."

"It was simple enough, in the end, Val; but in the beginning I almost gave up hope. On that day when you let Marshall shut your door in my face, I was absurdly angry with you. I ought to have known that in the state of your mind at that moment you were powerless to reason quietly. I thought I'd let you get over your anger, and I made up my mind you

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would be here again that same night. Don't curve your lips into that little sarcastic line—you see I was foolishly measuring your affection for me by mine for you. Two hours without you cured *my* temper promptly! But when that night went, and another, and still another, when days and nights passed and a whole week was gone, I told myself I could not stand another hour of it.

I went to your house, found it was empty, heard that Marshall had taken it on, but that the sale of furniture was about to take place, saw the miserable old liar, his wife, who swore that she had no more notion than the babe unborn where you had gone. That was the first of many facers for me, but to take you through them would only bore—or perhaps amuse you. For weeks I searched every likely and unlikely spot; every day I told myself you might go to Halifax for all I cared—Gad! but I was in a rage with you,—every night I woke up out of dreams of you, and realised to the full my immeasurable loss. Then one day, pretty well four months ago, I happened to meet someone whose conversation gave me some sort of idea that you had returned to the old house,—he saw that she started slightly, and as his own memory travelled back to his short and sharp interview with Wingate on that day, the softness momentarily died out of his voice,—“so I went there, and this time caught Marshall, who is not so good a liar as his wife. He pretended to know nothing.”

“He told you the truth then,” she interrupted. “He did not and does not know where I went.”

Brabazon shrugged his shoulders.

“Any how,” he continued, “Fate was kinder than you or your servant. There was a letter lying on the hall table addressed to you bearing the Mitching

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postmark. That seemed to me a strange coincidence, because I know some people living at Mitching. The Herbertsons, a man called Grenvil Delmar, and another who continually stays with him, Kerr Wingate. What is it, Val?" he broke off suddenly, as a little smothered sound escaped her, and she turned from him a white, quivering face.

"You're ill—faint! What a careless brute I am!" He got up rapidly and rang a bell. Val did not see who answered, or hear what order was given; she was only vaguely thankful to him that he stayed for several moments at the other side of the room.

When he came back, he leant against her chair again with his knee on its arm, and drew her forward till her shoulders rested against it. With his free hand he reached backward to a little table, and from it lifted out of its bed of ice a bottle from which he poured golden, sparkling liquid into a glass that he held to Valerie's lips.

"Drink it—every drop," he insisted.

She obeyed; she drank greedily, thirstily, because her mouth was parched and dry, because in a moment it seemed to put new life into her, to warm her chilled blood, and sent it tingling through her veins. And when he refilled the glass, she took it from him with a little smile, and held it in her own hand, and sipped at it very slowly, and felt that she was swiftly reviving, felt pleasantly dulled to the misery that was her constant companion, felt more strongly than ever the conviction stealing over her that, after all, nothing really mattered, now.

"Go on," she urged him, when he had assured himself that she was better and had resumed his seat.

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"Did—you—you look for me at—at—Mitching."

"Yes."

"You heard—of me?"

"No. But I happened to drop on Valdor, the artist, a few days later. I'd lost sight of him for some years. When I went into his studio, the first thing I saw was your picture. By Jove, I had to fish him like a trout! No matter how deftly I threw, he would not nibble. It took no end of time; but at last I managed to discover that you were his model, and where you lived. You know nearly all the rest. I found you; you dismissed me instantly. I knew it was useless to come and try to force my way into your home. I heard about your 'boys' from Valdor. I ran up against Dunbar at the studio, and practically commissioned him on the spot to write some music that I've been wanting for some time for a man who does not know how to go about finding it himself. You would not take the cue I gave you last night when I alluded to a former meeting, and I thought you were actually going to refuse my friendship."

"And you were right . . ."

"But, Val, I told you the other night—I——"

"I don't forget. Still I say that for myself I refuse, and always shall refuse, your friendship," with a little curious smile. "But I won't refuse it for the Bogie—young Dunbar. It is why I am here now; it is why I gave in to you when you exacted my promise to meet you. Let us understand each other, Cuthbert. I went out of your life, I stayed out of it; because I eluded you, I became the more desirable in your eyes. If I had remained at hand, the search for me would have lost all its charm. Because you know that my heart is ice you are keener, far keener

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than in the old days, to bring to it warmth; because you think that passion is dulled to sleep within me, you cannot know rest till you have succeeded in stirring it once more to life, till again you awake it . . ."

"You wrong me!" he broke in across her words. "From the hour you parted from me I could not know rest, because I could not forget you; I knew I could not live without you, and I wanted more than anything to set right the wrong I had done you. Val, be a little reasonable now, at anyrate. After all, was my crime so great against you? Look back upon that time, and ask yourself."

"I have looked back—through all these months I have done nothing else but look back—and I have realised that if first the blame was with you, afterwards it all lay at my door. I said that to you then, I say it again. It was only—only——"

"It was only that, after all, you learned that the love you gave me was nothing to the love of which you were capable. You met another who, perhaps, would have scorned to stoop to deception, but whose love for you was not strong enough to take risk of any sort—not strong enough to pardon—only so weak that when he knew you were not all he had believed you, he turned from you, and left you to the life you have led since—a hell of work and want and useless regret!"

Her eyes asked a question that he answered at once.

"I know, not because I have heard one word of you since the day you bid me leave you, but because of what you said to me the other night. I know, because you have made me understand that your heart is dead to me. The wrong I did you would

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not kill love ; the fact that I have a wife, and that I kept that secret from you, would not kill love either. You know as well as I, that in letting me give my life up to you, you would be wronging no woman. You turned from me first in bitter disappointment and anger, which I understand better now than I did then ; you turn from me now because you are on your knees at another man's heart—the heart of a man who feared to make you his wife. And think of me as you will, I maintain that mine is a better love than his. I only ask you to let me make what poor amends I can ; I only ask to make your life easier ; I only ask you to believe that you are dearer to me now than you ever were. I only ask you to let me send you or take you somewhere where you will be happier, where you will regain your lost health. Can't you understand that I ask nothing—*nothing* else ?”

She looked at him curiously : though she heard every word distinctly, and took in the sense of each, she was conscious that while he spoke she was silent, chiefly because she was trying to shake off a feeling of curious numbness that was not unpleasant. The fumes of the wine had risen to her head, and had tipped her thoughts, somehow, with a touch of recklessness that she but vaguely understood. All the time a voice seemed to be whispering in her ears, “nothing matters.” Brabazon had said, with brutal truth, but with gentle pity, that she was on her knees at another man's heart. It was true. She had not thought of it before ; but she knew that she had been on her knees at Wingate's heart all through these long weary days that had robbed her of hope and of health. And it might be that he cared nothing, that he had forgotten. He must be careless.

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of her fate, since never once had he sought to know what it might be.

Brabazon, in taking her glass, had kept her hand in his possession, and now he was silent while he smoothed the soft palm gently. With every word and touch he took her back to the first days of their love, the best days, when she had trusted him utterly; when in his own manner, a manner baffling description, he had won her confidence and her heart, and had filled her days with joy, the memory of which returned to her with full force now.

"Don't you understand?" he questioned again.

"No; I don't. Nothing on earth could make me believe in an utterly disinterested friendship from you. But I am certain that you mean well. Tell me how well you mean towards young Dunbar?"

"I hardly follow you, Val. But I can put work in his way; his own splendid talent will lead him to fame."

"Not without assistance."

"Not without assistance," Brabazon repeated.

"Frankly, are you prepared to give it him for my sake?"

"Frankly, I am."

"And if I go out of this room now, and tell you that I never mean to see or speak to you again—you will wash your hands of him?"

"I shall. That is not a threat, Val. It's forcing you into a bargain that will be for your good. Let me ease my conscience by making up to you a little for the past, and in return I'll fling that boy up the ladder of fame as fast as I can manage it. Come back into my life—you'll do it with your eyes open this time, and I swear I'll not abuse your trust in me—and you may command of me first for yourself, and

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then for those struggling boys, all of them, what you will."

"Come back into your life . . . ?" she echoed.

"Yes; give me the right to stand between you and the misery of your life now—restore to me the rights you gave me long ago, and I'll show you how very little I shall ask—if you will trust me. Oh, hang it, Val," getting up and walking restlessly about the room with both hands thrust deep into his pockets, "I love you! I'm mad with the joy of having found you and of seeing you here. I've been fighting like a demon with the desire to hold you in my arms, and tell you all that is in my heart—I'm mad with longing for the touch of your lips, and—and—with . . . damn it! I'm trying to do and say all that you could wish, but I'm not such a fool that I don't know you've not got a chance against me now. I behaved badly to you once, and I want to show you that I know I deserve some sort of punishment. God knows you're giving it to me at this moment; but there's a limit to my patience . . . "

He came to her side suddenly and stood over her, all the indolence dying out of his eyes and voice. She looked up at him, and told herself that what he said he meant for the moment, and that equally for the moment she held all and more than her old influence over him. She looked up into his face, and unfortunately she laughed. The effect was like flame to oil. He lifted her out of the chair so swiftly that she had no time to resist. He kissed her eyes and her hair and her throat half savagely, and pushed aside the laces at her breast to rest his lips on the soft flesh beneath. And he held her lips to his till she thrust his head back breathlessly.

"It is your own fault. Why did you laugh at

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me?" he demanded, a little alarmed when he saw that she lay back in his hold white as death. "Val, you're not trying to get away from me. What is it that you mean . . ."

"What is my strength against yours?"

He put her back into the chair, while he told himself that he could wait.

"Are you going to be friends with me?" lamely, but with a touch of fear. She let her hand rest in his.

"Val, I can't put up with the idea of your going back to that miserable den. Will you . . ."

"Wait," she said, "I am not going to answer you yet. I must have time to think . . ."

"To-morrow; not an hour more."

"I won't promise. Let me go now."

"Rubbish! You are going to dine here with me."

"Will you send me home before half-past ten?"

"If you insist."

"Very well, then, I dine with you."

He said nothing for many minutes; then he bent down till his face almost touched her hair.

"You don't care a hang for me now, Val?"

"You put it vulgarly. I've no heart, no power to love."

"You never will care—again."

"You want to look too far into the future."

"Have you forgotten—everything? Am I nothing to you? Do you hate me?"

"Will you swear not to behave as you behaved just now if I tell you the truth?"

"I swear . . .!"

"Well, if—if—you would be gentle to me—your better self, as you were when I saw you first to-night,

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I should like you better than I ever—I should care for you more than I ever cared."

"What am I—what does my life matter now," she said in her heart, while with his gentlest grace he bent over her hands, and her dry, hot eyes rested on his head. "*He* has forgotten, and I need not remember."

XXII

IT was close upon eleven when Valerie mounted the stairs which led to her home; her inclination was to go at once to her own rooms, but she knew that Dunbar would not go to bed till he was sure that she had returned. She was curiously tired, tired as she had never been before, tired in a way that made her feel helpless and foolish, and momentarily on the point of hysterical laughter.

The boys had heard her light step on the stairs, and the door was thrown open to her before she reached it.

"Back again!" Dunbar exclaimed cheerfully, taking her bare, cool hands, and drawing her into their common sitting-room.

He did not ask her where she had been; it was the sort of question they never asked each other. All were free to come and go without the fear of comment, of demands for explanation. Generally Valerie told them quite naturally; to-night she did not. Dunbar had been at home nearly half an hour, he said; the young artist, Fred Hermann, had been busily cooking and eating supper during that time; and Charlie Marks, "the author" as he was called, had not yet put in an appearance.

The eyes of Hermann and Dunbar ran swiftly over her dress, and then they met, and then both men turned abruptly aside.

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"Any luck, Bogie?" she inquired, not seating herself, but leaning a little heavily against the back of a chair.

"I think so—of course nothing is absolutely settled yet. One could hardly expect that in so short a time. Brabazon himself did not turn up this evening as he half promised, but I shall see him, I think, to-morrow."

Valerie's eyes were on the floor, a very faint pink was coming and going in her cheeks, the hysterical laugh was threatening her again, and she had to cover it with an absurd sort of suppressed giggle, that caused both men to stare at her hard.

"I'm glad," she said. "What do you think of the whole affair, Fred?"

"It strikes me as being a splendid opportunity. I'm more pleased than I can say. I wonder what has come of 'the author'?"

"You're very white, Val," said Dunbar, still avoiding Hermann's eyes, and looking at the girl with a puzzled frown.

"I'm tired. I'll go to bed. Don't sit up too late, you boys. Good-night."

She blew them a little kiss from her finger-tips, and went towards the door. But half way she paused, and looked on the floor and the table searchingly.

"Lost something, Val?" Hermann asked, looking round too.

"Your gloves?" inquired Dunbar, who had noticed that her hands and arms were bare to the elbows.

"I—perhaps I dropped them—it was so hot . . . " she returned, and then, with that new foolish giggle and another good night, turned away.

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The men sat silent, after she had gone, for many moments. Neither cared to be the first to speak, it seemed. At last Hermann ventured the remark—

“Is she ill, Bogie?”

“She’s been ill for months, but it’s not that to-night.”

He took out a fresh cigarette, passed the case to his companion, and then struck and held out a match with much deliberation.

“Fred, what’s in your mind? Upon my soul, I don’t know how to put my thought into words, and I feel as though you ought to horsewhip me for giving heed to it a moment.”

“If it was any other woman, I should say she’d had more to drink than is good for her . . . ”

Dunbar made a gesture that said his own thought had been put into words.

“But with Val,” the other continued, “the idea is an insult, beside being too absurd.”

“You saw how she is dressed, Fred?”

“As I’ve never seen her dressed since she came here.”

“And she turns up at eleven, for the first time, saying nothing of where she has been.”

“She’s her own mistress, Bogie—and . . . ”

“I’m aware of that. But if she were our sister she couldn’t be more dear to us. You know as well as I, that if I thought anyone—if . . . ”

The words were checked by the sudden entrance of Charlie Marks.

“Any luck?” he inquired of Dunbar, “and any supper left?” while he put down a brown paper parcel and seemed to be looking round the room for someone else.

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"I think so to both questions."

"Good! I'll hear about the one, and have some of the other."

Another pause, and then suddenly—

"Where's Val?"

"Gone to bed."

"Not been out?" looking from one to the other.

"Yes. Only came in about ten minutes ago. What makes you ask?"

"If I tell you, you'll only think me a fool, but hanged if I've ever been more puzzled in my life. How did she come home?"

"I didn't see her till she came in."

"Did she have on white—white lace mostly?"

"Yes."

"And a hat that was all roses, and one white feather?"

"Yes."

Hermann and Dunbar looked at each other curiously.

"Then I was right! I thought if I'd taken any other woman for Val that I must be either mad or drunk. I got into the wrong bus, and when we were at the King's Road I noticed it. Got out at the top of Oakley Street and walked down. Two minutes after, a smart brougham pulled up. The woman I've described got out, and headed for this direction. I should have run after her in sheer amaze, but that I went right into Jephson's arms. He wouldn't let me go, and of course the woman disappeared. But if it was not Val—well, I'll eat my hat!"

Dunbar sat down heavily in Valerie's chair.

"Got out of a brougham? At the corner of Oakley Street, you say?"

"Out of a brougham—a small night affair—smart

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coachman—splendid chestnut horse. Did she say where she'd been?"

"No."

"First time, then. Fred, Bogie, what does it mean?"

"God knows," returned Dunbar, and took another cigarette.

The next morning Valerie was up to give them breakfast in the usual way. She looked very childish and frail in her blue overall, and with the rough masses of her hair caught back by a ribbon at the nape of her neck. She frizzled the bacon and poached the eggs, and scolded Marks for letting the coffee boil over, in just her old merry way, and though every movement was an effort—an effort that became a more serious one every day—she hid the fact bravely under light chatter, while, as ever, she kept the men talking of themselves, and turned their attention as much as possible from herself.

This morning it was not an easy task. They were a little ill at ease with her; Charlie Marks wore an almost guilty air, and Hermann and Dunbar could not manage to meet her eyes. The very atmosphere of the little flat seemed to have changed. The chief interest that these boys had in life, outside their work, seemed to have been swept away from them suddenly. They had said little to each other on the previous night, they had had little opportunity of saying anything this morning, but each felt, in a different way, that he had been robbed of something, that there was a change, that never again could the little home in which they had been sad and merry seem the same in their eyes. Involuntarily their minds went back to Valerie's entrance into it, and

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they remembered that of the circumstances which led to her making her home with them when she was alone, in want, and evidently deserted by all, they knew nothing. They had never sought to know—they did not care. Her father had been their kindest friend; in his better days he had not only helped them as lads, but had practically kept them. He had given them work which was a sheer excuse for paying them, and he had saved them from much that now they hardly dared to look back upon. When their turn had come unexpectedly to give such as they had to his daughter, to give her, at all events, their care and affection, and the protection of which she seemed to stand in need, they took the opportunity gladly and thankfully. And from that day till this she had been the light of their home, the incentive to work, in many things their guide.

She had *made* the dingy flat a home, and one to which they were ever glad to return. She was responsible for keeping them out of cheap restaurants and bars; she caused them to pick and choose their companions, because there were few whom they cared to introduce to her; and though they hardly knew it themselves, she held them back from many things of which to-day they would have been ashamed, and for which they would have felt regret. Their lives were almost an open book for her to read, as they lived them now; their clean, simple, hard-working existence they had been proud to share with her; and now it had come upon them with a shock, that her life held some secret, not of the past, but of the present, which they might not share, some secret that planted in their young hearts and minds suspicion, anxiety, fear for her, which

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never once was tipped with anything resembling mere disappointment or simple curiosity.

She had seemed to belong so wholly to them, to their tender affection and their care. When she leant back in her chair this morning and poured out their coffee, they looked at her, and told themselves that she belonged to them wholly no longer.

They went out together presently, and they went out in rare silence. They hung together all that morning, as people do insensibly, in trouble, in grief.

"What do you think," asked Hermann once, and Dunbar answered with rare impatience for him:

"How can I say? We shall know soon enough!"

But the sweetness of the thought of success, of one day, perhaps, fame, was taken out of all his work that day.

Dunbar was kept too busily engaged during the next week to give way to disturbing thoughts; a little of his new success seemed to be shared by his companions, who picked up some fairly profitable employment, which kept them very busy; and Cuthbert Brabazon was constantly at their home. Every night there was a fresh discussion on the question of the music, which it had been determined Dunbar should write specially, not using anything that he had done before; every day there was some meeting at a place always appointed by Brabazon. As Valerie had fully anticipated, Brabazon wove part of his life into theirs, deftly, carefully; he made part of the happenings of their days part of the happenings of his. By degrees he interested himself in the work done both by Marks and Hermann. It was at his suggestion that a certain magazine or paper was tried for the publication of a likely story

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or article, perhaps his letter with which Charlie Marks went armed to the editor. It was Brabazon who gave Hermann his first commission worth the name, who bought one or two of his pictures at very fair prices, and, more than that, recommended Hermann to many of his friends. He had an exceedingly nice manner of doing these things, too, and a very unobtrusive one. He became the best of friends with them all—Valerie standing out alone, conspicuously, for her extreme coldness of manner to him, which, however, never amounted to rudeness.

But though Brabazon helped them easily, as if half unconsciously, in many ways; though he kept Dunbar busy at work, and though that work gave evident satisfaction, nothing had been decided. He had not been actually commissioned to write the music for the musical comedy for which the book and lyrics were almost complete. There was nothing yet upon paper; and always there was a sense of uncertainty, a feeling which Dunbar's friends shared with him, that Brabazon was waiting, hanging back a little, for what, they could not conjecture.

Valerie knew; and the knowledge seemed to sap her little remaining strength, to rob her of the little life left in her.

The old cry, "Nothing matters," rang in her ears day and night; it was only the courage to let it lead her on, to listen to it above every other voice, which failed her.

She was thinking so, and despising herself generally one night, when the Bogie entered hurriedly.

"Brabazon not here?" he inquired of her. "That's odd. He was to be up here by eight sharp, and I raced home all I knew to meet him. It's twenty past," looking at his watch.

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"Not so much over the hour," soothed Valerie. "What is on to-night?"

"Why, Ellison is coming up with him. On him, it seems, that the real decision depends."

Valerie said "Oh!" and she turned to study the young man's face, while he busied himself about, unconscious of her scrutiny. How young and happy it was! How keen and bright and full of hope were the kind eyes, with their new light shining in them! How all life had changed for him with this new hope!

If he but knew it, hope and life itself, or all that made life worth the name to him, lay in the palm of her hand, to give or to withhold. If he knew it he would dash her hand aside, and trample his work to rags at her feet; and all his life would be ruined, now that he had tasted the sweets of possible success. What might not become of him then? She dared not think. It was her fault that he had gone so far; she would be a coward indeed if she dragged him back now.

"Here they are!" exclaimed Dunbar, across her thoughts. "No—only Brabazon," stretching his neck to look out of the window.

Valerie came back to life with Brabazon's voice in her ears, and her fingers held in his close clasp.

"I am afraid I am quite half an hour late," he said, "I must ask you to forgive me. The fact is, the day has been simply full up; and to finish it I committed the rare folly of going to a wedding, or, rather, to the reception after it. Beastly bore, and hindered me fearfully."

"I rather like seeing weddings—pretty ones," Valerie said, simply for the sake of saying something.

"Do you? Well, you should have had my place, and welcome, this afternoon, Miss Drummond. I

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daresay it was as pretty as you could wish. What took me to it was that I simply wouldn't believe this chap had committed matrimony if I had not seen him with my own eyes. Known him for years, but never knew him to look at any woman. Went out of England about four or five months ago, and not his best friend knew or heard anything of him till he returned in company with the lady who is his wife to-day, and her people. Sheer amaze dragged me to the show, and then he is a great friend of my wife's. I don't suppose you'd know him, though he is a bit of an artist himself, I think."

"Who?" asked Dunbar, from the other side of the room, only having caught a word here and there, and not much interested.

"His name's Kerr Wingate. I was saying I went to see him married to-day, or at least . . . Miss Drummond! Good heavens!"

The startled exclamation brought Dunbar swiftly across the room in time to hear a stifled cry from Valerie, to see her hand go up to her throat as though she were choking, and then to know that she had fallen forward into Brabazon's arms unconscious.

What he did not see was the flash of light that momentarily shone in Brabazon's languid eyes, the smile that for an instant played about his mouth—a smile that said a thousand things. What Dunbar did not hear was the long indrawn breath that caught in Brabazon's throat almost like the sound of a sob. They put her into a great chair; they brought brandy and a fan, and Dunbar searched her room for eau-de-cologne. When she came back to life it was to look straight up into Brabazon's eyes, to feel his fingers clasped on her wrist, her face damp and chilled, and to see, as she looked upward, the loose

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strands of her hair twisting themselves into little wet rings.

Dunbar had gone out of the room again in search of something for her comfort. Brabazon brought his eyes back from the closed door to hers once more. He bent down till his lips were close to her ear.

"Listen to me, Val," he said decidedly, "this can't and shan't go on. I won't stand it! I gave you a day in which you should answer me a certain question. That's a week ago, and I've let you have all the other six because I'm a weak fool in your hands. This has settled it. At this rate you've not many more weeks to live. I'm going to take you out of it all, with or without your consent—I'd rather it were with it. You will have to——" he paused and brought her face round to his till their eyes were close, "you'll have to choose now, at this moment, before Dunbar comes back, for yourself and—and—for him—them. You'll have to give me your answer."

"You want . . ." she began, and he made a gesture of great impatience, while his fingers strengthened their hold on hers, and his eyes went back anxiously to the door.

"I want you. I told you the other night," hurriedly, "that I wanted you to come back into my life—I want your promise."

"And then . . .?"

"You are simply playing with words to gain time, to hold out till Dunbar comes back into the room, when you think you will have put me off for another day. When I have your promise his future will be pretty well assured. Be quick, I hear him coming back . . ."

"If he knew . . ."

"Well, he doesn't. And if he ever knows—it will

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be when he has made his way and some of his fortune, and he will have forgotten—you."

She hardly heard a word. She had come back to life and memory with one sentence of his ringing in her ears, hammering on her aching head, beating into her dazed brain: "*His name's Kerr Wingate. I was saying I went to see him married to-day . . .*" And over it the old cry, the old voice saying through the storm of her useless tears, "Nothing matters. Why need you remember, since *he* has forgotten?"

"Nothing matters," she said heavily, unconsciously echoing the cry.

"You promise, Val?"

"As you like. I . . ."

He silenced her with his mouth crushed on hers.

When Dunbar returned Brabazon was sitting on the window sill, looking a little, a very little, bored.

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XXIII

IT was the sweetest of all months, September—September ripe, hushed, golden brown.

Never did Delmar display its beauties as at this season of the year, and so thought Pat Brabazon to-day as she drove up to the door, her eyes looking lovingly out on to the gardens that were so dear to her, her feet impatient to leave the carriage.

Grenvil Delmar himself came out to meet her.

"I sent you word—you expected me?" she said, as they reached the hall. "You can give me half an hour?"

He did not answer till he had led her into his own den; then he closed the door behind them, and held her hands for a long moment to his lips.

"My whole life," he returned, "as you know."

"What a comfort you are, Gren!" she declared, trying to laugh, because she felt that tears were close, and because everything grew bright, the way always clearer and easier in his presence.

"Something has happened," he questioned, while he took her long driving coat and threw it over a chair. "Something to trouble you?"

She nodded.

"Something is always happening to trouble me, and I'm always flying to you when it does. You're the only creature alive, Gren, who understands me a

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little bit! I've been playing detective," she added, while he smiled and sat on the edge of a table very close to her chair, "and I'm not only displeased with the results, but a—little frightened."

"Small wonder! You detective! What on earth do you mean, Pat?"

"It's about that poor girl, Valerie Drummond . . ." watching him out of the corners of her lovely anxious eyes, while Delmar only said "Oh!"

"If you say 'Oh!' like that, I shan't—like you."

"I'll say it anyhow you please, my dear; but I thought you had forgotten her."

"Then you thought wrong. I couldn't—I knew I never should; the thought of her positively haunted me. But I've found out all about her in these last two months—and it's distressing. Aren't you interested," quickly, "don't you care? Are you still prejudiced?"

"If you are interested and care, then I am," he returned, clasping tightly the little hand she had slipped into his. "But if I tell you the truth, I am a bit prejudiced still. Her name suggests—oh, many things, people, I don't want to remember or let you remember; and, apart from that, I cannot help holding her responsible for the loss of our best friend."

"Kerr. But how unjust that is; and it is unlike you to be unjust."

"Tell me all about it."

"But wait; when you say you hold her responsible for the loss of our old friend, do you forget that we agreed that she must have told him the truth. They left this place on the same day—I am convinced that he followed her; and we have heard nothing of either of them ever since—more than six months ago."

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"There have been times when I have been in fear lest he took her abroad—married her there . . ."

"No; she has been in England, in London, all the time. I know that now. So you see it must have been the truth which parted them, and, oh! Gren, be just—she must have been greatly brave to tell it—I am certain she knew *I* would never betray her."

"You are right—she was greatly brave—rarely honest."

"And sometimes I think he might not have left her—he might have forgiven; but of course we do not know all. He has returned . . ."

"Returned! You mean that Kerr is back in England?"

"Yes; Dolly Herbertson saw him last evening. She told me when she got home. He asked where I could be found, and she let him know I am returning to town to-night. That is why I wanted to be sure of seeing you first."

"Good heavens! I'm very glad, though."

"Gren, what if he has come back to find her? The idea got into my head in the night, and I cannot get it out."

"Is it likely?"

"It is not impossible. I know how Kerr would love. It may be that he has found life impossible without her. And oh, if that is so, when he knows all there is to know . . ."

"What is it? What is it you have heard about her, Pat?" Delmar inquired with interest real enough now, and keen anxiety. Pat was not a woman to make a sensation out of nothing; it was plain to him that she was very agitated.

"First and worst, that—*he* has got her into his clutches again."

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"Brabazon, you mean?" Delmar said with closed teeth, with suddenly paling face. Then he gave his shoulders a great shake, and got up to take several steps up and down the room.

"That being so, do you think it worth while to trouble about her, Pat?"

She looked at him reproachfully, and getting up too, stopped him in his restless walk.

"But how on earth did you come to know of—these people?" he inquired, with evident annoyance.

"I'll tell you if you'll listen, and just won't harden your heart against her. If ever she did harm, she has been punished for it in these few months. You know Valdor—the artist? Well, it was through him I first heard of her, through him I traced her life over the days since she left here. Heaven knows what befell her in the beginning, but she went to the home of some young artists whom she had known in her father's time, went there in want, and very evidently in misery. She stayed to share with them their home and their work, and in a way to keep house for them—such a keep as it must have needed. Valdor told me—he can colour a story well. She was his model, but that was not the worst; she came down to sitting for men that, when Valdor heard of it, he employed her when he did not want her to prevent her going to them. What she must have gone through I—I cannot bear to go over; and then a stroke of good fortune fell upon this new composer—Dunbar—you remember? who made such a hit with those songs of Ellison's. I learned that it was—Cuthbert who launched Dunbar, Cuthbert who first discovered those young fellows and Valerie Drummond through Valdor. I—I don't understand it all, but I know from what she said to me that day—here, that she had cut her

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own life purposely, that she had made the effort to escape it and him. You know, as I do, that the mere fact of a woman's trying to escape him would make him the more determined that she should not."

"And now?" Delmar began, "You said that——"

"And now she is with him, to be seen with him. They tell me that she is the ghost of herself, that the doctors hold out little hope of her recovery."

"She is ill, then?"

"She goes about. She lives a little way out of town, and Cuthbert is the only creature she ever sees. I've indisputable proof of all this—you know how many there have ever been who are glad to bring such stories to *me*. From what Valdor says, it seems that her companions—young Dunbar and his friends—when they knew, gave her the cold shoulder. It seemed to me it was rather giving themselves airs, but how much more there may be behind it all I cannot tell. The point is this, Cuthbert does not flaunt her in the face of the world as is his usual custom with the ladies of his fancy. I'm convinced that, whatever she has done, she has been driven into; and now that Kerr has returned, I would not have him hear of her for a kingdom."

"My dear little girl," Delmar said gravely, "your tender heart will lead you into no end of unhappiness for others. I beg of you, don't think it mere injustice, prejudice on my part, and do believe me when I tell you that I am certain these people are not worth one of your sweet thoughts. We don't know what happened so far as she and Kerr were concerned, but if she told him the truth, which I think likely, I honour her for it—it is one to her good at all events; but now, what can you do? I don't think with you

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that Kerr has come back with that woman in his mind, and if he has, surely the best thing for him will be his utter disenchantment."

"But for her? Gren, I tell you that a good man's love, such a life as she might have led with him, would have been more than the saving of her—it——"

"It would have been the ruin of him—and he comes first in my mind."

"Is that how you would think if I——"

"I forbid you to speak of yourself in the same breath with them—I won't listen to you. Dear, be reasonable," taking her hands and studying her little determined face with anxiety. "What can you do? Nothing."

"I can—I'm going to. I'm going to Cuthbert."

He dropped her hands as though they had burnt him.

"What!"

"I'm going to Cuthbert. I don't know how I'm going to manage, but I'm going to get the truth from him somehow. And if not, I'm going to her; and if she'll let me, I'll protect her from him anyhow."

"Pat, you're mad!"

"I'm not. I'm so sure of the girl and of my own convictions. Oh, Gren," resting both hands on his shoulders, "this is the one moment in all our lives since we first met when you have not seen with me as I see, when I have not your sympathy and your comprehension."

"I confess it. God knows that I would rather do anything, give any possession, than that it should be so, than that it should be possible; but I cannot deny it. You are going on supposition almost entirely, on a story highly coloured and exaggerated, perhaps, on your intense sympathy and sweet good-

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nature, and on your desire to right a wrong with which you'll get no thanks for meddling. I cannot prevent you from going to your—husband,” with bitter intonation, and the nearest approach to anger he had ever shown her, “to a man who has already heaped upon you every insult it is possible for a man to offer a woman; but I can and do entreat you to have nothing to do with the woman or her set. You will promise me that, Pat?”

“And you will be very angry with me if I do not?” she asked wistfully.

“I cannot be angry with you. You know it well. All you are and do and say seems good and right and wise in my eyes, but not this. It is folly, the worst folly.”

“Listen, Gren. I won't do anything that I think you would not like; but you will let me try—you——”

He made an impatient gesture, but he did not answer. It was so impossible to him to seem to thwart her wishes in any way, and, added to that, he knew that she was so wise generally, and so far-seeing. It was seldom that Pat made mistakes, and never had he known her to act rashly, foolishly, on impulse. He felt that she was utterly wrong now, and yet he felt, too, that she was not the woman to make so great a mistake as this seemed in his eyes.

“I give in to you,” he said, with the very faintest weariness. “I'm weak as water in your hands, as you know.” Then hurriedly, “You are going to town now. You were on your way. When shall you see Kerr?”

“Very soon. I gathered from the manner in which he inquired about me that he rather wants

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to see me. You are not able to come up for a day or two?"

She asked the question a little quickly. She would not let him know how more than easy she would have been in mind had he been nearer at hand than in his home.

"I wish it were possible. But, Pat, you are to remember that if you need me—if you want my help——"

"You anticipate my getting into mischief! Gren, I must go. Tell me I have not vexed you much."

"Not at all. Believe it. You don't understand, dear. It is only that always I think of you first, of what is best for you."

"Don't I know it?"

"I hope you do—well, and that makes me anxious, foolishly anxious, perhaps."

"And you're not vexed or—Gren, say it."

He dropped her coat which he had been holding out; he put both his arms round her instead.

"Pat, when you plead with me you break down barriers, you make me lose my grip on all you have taught me to remember. You don't mean it, but you become my tempter . . ."

"Forgive me! Dear, forgive me!"

"Everything, except your determination to doom me to this life that is not life at all! There, you must forgive me now! Must I let you go? Till we meet again, then."

She was very pale; he had released her, and she stood with one hand on the table. Her dark gown threw up every bewitching tint of skin, and hair, and eyes. Delmar put on her coat and went half way to the door. He came back to her in one quick step.

"Say something to me—something to keep me

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company through this hateful night. I swear not to take advantage of it, to seek to alter your determination."

She thought of all his weary life—she measured it by her own; and she went to him and framed his face in both her hands.

"You want no words from me," she whispered. "*You know.* Try to live in that sweetest knowledge, as I live."

"Say it—this once, Pat."

"The knowledge of my love!"

The words were faint, but they reached him. With a low, hoarse murmur he wound his arms about her again, and bent down his face till it was hidden on her breast.

"The knowledge of your love. My heart's dearest!"

He held her lips to his with a long sigh, and took the flowers she was wearing.

A moment later he was putting her into her carriage with a laugh that sounded light, and a few words about her journey that sounded indifferently polite.

And Pat leant back in her corner and closed her eyes, and felt again the pressure of his fond arms and his kisses on her lips.

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XXIV

"**M**R WINGATE, madam. I said that you . . ."

"Oh, I will see Mr Wingate, Arnold, but no one else," Pat Brabazon interrupted the maid quickly. "He has not gone away?"

"No, madam."

"Very well, say I will come down at once."

It was the afternoon of the next day, and Pat was putting the finishing touches to her toilet, preparatory to going out upon an errand that was not altogether to her taste, and one about which she was not very happy. She threw her hat and gloves down, and turned to her own maid.

"Telephone to the stable and say Roberts need not come round for half an hour. I can't have the horses standing in this rain."

Then she went down the stairs slowly, looking through the hall windows as she went, at the gloomy backs of dull houses that seemed still more gloomy under a darkened sky and in a downpour of rain. She was in her own charming little house that held no charm for her, in the house that she never occupied except when it was absolutely necessary.

She found Wingate walking about in the drawing-room, so changed in appearance that she could hardly repress a little exclamation of mingled surprise and alarm.

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"This is very good of you, Pat," he said, taking both her hands closely in his, "I am afraid I——"

"Nonsense! You knew I should see you; but I was not going to be at home to the army that generally find me out directly I come to town. You met Dolly the night before last—she said you were asking for me. Kerr, what have you been doing? What has changed you like this?"

He laughed, without mirth, with a new ring of bitterness in the laugh.

"Don't ask me, Pat. I hardly know what I have or have not done during these last six months. I know I've not succeeded in the one thing I meant to do—in forgetting—in living down a memory."

"Tell me about it," she said, with sweet sympathy, drawing her hands from his and pointing to a chair. "Kerr, do you realise that all this time has gone since you left us without, or almost without, a word, and that you have kept silence to us ever since? You might have sent a line to Gren or me. I'm so glad you came to see me. I wonder if you will be angry if I tell you that when I have thought upon your prolonged absence, I have also thought that I knew something of the reason for it?"

"You, Pat? At this moment I almost hope you may be right."

"I *have* thought it—and that I might have guessed the reason for your sudden return. I have presentiments sometimes—and I'm rarely wrong. Kerr, did you go away because—because of Valerie Drummond?"

She kept her eyes on his face while she asked the question, though she saw that he went very white, that the lines about his mouth grew drawn and hard as if with pain.

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"Yes; fool that I was! Pat," catching at her hand again, and leaning towards her eagerly, "you have seen her—you know where I can find her? I came to you, though you might be an unlikely person, because no one else can tell me of her."

It was Pat's turn to go a little white now, and then to feel the colour mounting to her cheeks.

"Then I was right," she cried as eagerly; "you have come back to find her? Oh, Kerr! why did you ever leave her?"

"Answer me this first—do you know where she is—can you tell me?"

And Pat, feeling that for a time at least she must keep such knowledge as was hers to herself, answered deliberately—

"No."

Wingate threw himself back in the chair with a sigh that was like a groan.

"Pat," he said presently, "to you of all people it is hardest to say why—I left her."

"And if I know, Kerr——"

"If you know, then you have seen her—you do know—you could not have heard except from her own lips! For God's sake, Pat, tell me that she is alive—well."

"She is alive—I know that; but I do not think it is very well with her. Wait—I have never seen her or spoken with her since that day at Delmar when I said I would drive her home. I did not—I took her with me to Dolly Herbertson's. But I had recognised her, and she knew my name all too well."

Wingate dropped his face in his hands as though he could not bear the steady glance of those clear sweet eyes that were bent gravely, he thought a little reproachfully, upon him; and Pat repeated

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all that had passed between her and Valerie on that day—repeated it without missing a point that would tell in the girl's favour, with, unconsciously, a word here and there which was like a stab to Wingate's heart, which made regret and remorse and bitter self-condemnation almost unendurable.

"She told me all that I have told you," she said presently—"it may be that she told you more; but no one, man or woman, with a grain of sense, ever looked into that girl's eyes and read a wanton, deliberate lie. From my soul I pitied her, in my heart I would have trusted her implicitly: you know as well as I that the woman who has been *his* victim never had a chance. I had guessed that you loved her, Kerr; and when she told me that she wished me and all my friends to forget her, I knew that she meant to leave Dale and to escape from you. You remember that we saw nothing of her after, and I had to go away. I did hear that you and she had left the place on the same day; and oh, when you disappeared, and she too, do you know that my hope was that you had taken her to another country . . . "

"Wait—wait!" Wingate entreated, putting up one hand to implore silence. "I have condemned and hated myself so long, I have thought of myself as the greatest brute under heaven, and now you make me understand that I have been worse than that—I have been a coward to the woman to whom every beat of my heart belongs."

"She told you the truth, Kerr?"

"She told me the truth."

"And not even that could win her your forgiveness?"

"It was not a question of pardon. I tell you that I have realised since that I was a coward; it was fear

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—fear of memory. I knew that life would be a hell for us both, because, never could I *forget!* Now I know," his voice sinking to a tone of helpless misery, "that it had been better to live in the hell of that memory, than in the agony of longing, the never ending craving . . . oh, why do I talk to you like this?" he broke off abruptly, a little tinge of shamed red spreading over his dark, colourless face. "Why are you the only person to whom I ever open my heart or——"

"Because you know how much I feel for you, dear old friend ; you know how well I comprehend."

He closed his fingers over her little hand in silent thanks.

"All this is"—he said after a little while,—“was very painful to you, Pat.”

"For your sake—for hers, yes. But you are thinking of Cuthbert. My dear Kerr, except when some of his villainies come home to me through any of my friends, I simply do not remember that he exists," with a little tip tilting of her perfect, expressive nose.

"Valerie—did not once mention his name," he said suddenly, with evident difficulty. "Nothing but the bare truth passed her lips to me. An accident told me who was responsible for the ruin of her life."

"And you?"

"I—lost my head a little. I think that to have left her would have been altogether impossible but for that accident. It shook all the faith I had, it roused new doubt, it—it—heaven forgive me, it placed her in another light in my eyes for the moment; it robbed me of reason and swept aside all the justice in me. I never heard her whole story—I don't suppose I could have listened in the frame of

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mind I was in then. She was so careful to condemn herself alone, to raise the barrier which she had built between us, and to spare all others. I see it now—it shames me bitterly—but I would not see it then.”

“I knew she could be very loyal,” put in Pat, with her eyes on his.

“God bless you for your trust in her—for your kindly words of her,” he said, bringing his hands gently yet heavily on her shoulders.

“I did not mean to—say all this to you. I never dreamed that you knew and guessed so much. I—life is not life without her, and though I have fought against that knowledge, it has gained the upper-hand at last. I came home to find her. Her servant—her former servants—know nothing. I believe they speak the truth, because they seem genuinely upset and anxious about her—no one knows anything. I don’t know why I should have thought you might.”

“I have thought of her and you a great deal. I wish you had not gone away, because we should have been sure to speak of this, and—and—things might have been different. I—I—did hear very vaguely of her once . . .”

“That it was not well with her,” swiftly.

“Yes.”

“Are you hiding anything from me, Pat?”

Pat kept her tell-tale eyes lowered while she answered, “No.” Then, nervously, she added: “She had no one but those old ladies, who were not likely to sympathise; her life from infancy had evidently not been a sheltered one. She—went through hard times, and I think she—became a model. I wonder,” said Pat, dreamily, a little irrelevantly, but with quaint curiosity, “why men are so cruelly unjust to

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us—always—even where they love greatly? Why are they, whose sins are almost all committed against women, so incapable of leniency, of common justice? There are many through whom a woman sinks to the lowest depths; there are none who will hold out a hand to lift that woman up. I said to Valerie Drummond, 'Don't coast downhill because you think all the world is against you.' But what could she think, what did anything matter when the one soul who loved her, and whom she loved, the only creature who could have lifted her up, or saved her, turned away because he had not courage to help her live down the past, and because he feared, not for her, but for *himself*—the future?"

"Every word you utter is just and true," Wingate said. "I have admitted it—I was a coward. No regret can help her or me, no remorse can wipe out these six months. I deserve your contempt, Pat. If it is not too deep for me, can—will you not try to help me find her now? Can love come too late? At least help me to think that it may not—this once."

"I was a brute to you—forgive me, Kerr," Pat said hastily, while the great tears that had gathered in her eyes fell down her cheeks. "You must let me think a little. You must leave me now, and—and—come to me the moment I send for you. I—I—may be able to help you, but at present it is not certain. Will you hold yourself in readiness to come to me at a moment's notice, wherever I may be?"

"Of course."

"And I can find you——?"

"At my old rooms—I never go anywhere else."

"Good! I am so glad to have seen you and talked like this with you. Good-bye for the present."

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Directly she was alone she ordered the carriage to come round at once.

"The idea I got into my head was the right one after all," she said to herself. "He has come back to her. It cannot—it shall not be too late. Whatever happens, he must not know."

Then, with her heart beating heavily and her hands trembling with excitement, she got into her carriage, and gave the address of her husband's rooms in Knightsbridge.

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XXV

THE rain poured down steadily. As Pat drove beneath the arch that led to the courtyard overlooking which were her husband's rooms, it made a small river which men were sweeping rapidly away with great brooms. She passed into the hall with an unconsciously haughty air, and when the lift boy inquired where she would be taken, she made no reply, but put out a detaining hand as they reached the floor she wanted.

The bell-push might have been sticky from the way she touched it; and when Lessing appeared she merely said, "Tell your master at once," and picked her way through the hall with slightly uplifted skirts, as she would have picked it through the mire of the streets.

Brabazon came to her at once, and it was plain from his surprised face that a visit so totally unexpected robbed him momentarily of speech and breath.

"You!" he said at last, and with a swift, rather nervous glance round.

"Your servant must have given my name—he knows me."

"He did. But—well, with Lessing, it's a sort of courtesy title—up here."

Pat bit her lip. Her feet almost took her instantly

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to the door, but she remembered, and remained by the flower-filled fireplace.

"To what am I indebted, etc.," Brabazon added in a moment. "Won't you sit down, Pat? That window chair is a very comfortable one. May I order you tea—you so rarely honour me . . ."

"Nothing—and I don't want to sit down."

Her husband shrugged his shoulders. He was taking in every detail of her beauty, her perfect style, her every grace of movement, and her exquisite toilette, and asking himself why it was that he never could do much more than merely admire her.

"You're looking very lovely, Pat."

"Which is no business of yours. I did not come up here to hear it."

"No, but you came here—of your own accord. Now, ladies who do that are prepared to be very sweet to me . . ."

Pat gave him one look which had the effect of the lash upon a cur; the next moment Brabazon was laughing softly, but his face was tinged with dusky red.

"I came to ask you this—what have you done with Valerie Drummond?"

"Whew! Good Lord! I say, Pat," sinking into a chair languidly, and throwing into his voice a touch of real pathos, "*you're* not going to start on a new tack?"

"I asked you a simple question for no other reason than that I want to know—answer me, please."

"What do you know about the Drummond girl?"

Pat made a gesture of suppressed rage.

"I know that you ruined her life in the beginning, and that you've contrived to get her into your power

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again after she once escaped you. I can find her with time and trouble, but I want to save that, and so I ask you "

"You're a most amazing woman."

"Will you tell me?"

"Not off hand. I must know more of your reasons for wishing to find the girl. Besides, how do you know I *can* tell you?"

"Cuthbert," she said, coming a very little nearer to him, "we have never been even the merest friends. You have openly insulted me, and I as openly despised you. I certainly have never asked you a favour—I'm going to ask you one to-day, and since it is the first, and you owe me much, you might grant it." Brabazon got out of the chair and bowed; then he remained standing, and greatly wondering. "I want you to tell me where you are hiding Valerie Drummond; and I tell *you* frankly that I want to know, that I may go to her. I met her once, and I pitied her desperately, because she was one of your victims. At that time the chance of a new life and a happy one was opening to her, but fate was against her. I'll stake my life that, having ruined hers, you cared little what became of her. I'm positive in my mind, if I know you at all, that simply because she made the effort to escape you, you left no stone unturned till you found her, and got her once more into your power."

"In a great deal of what you say you are perfectly right," he admitted, with a fine smile.

He was casting his memory swiftly back to the past, and clearing up one or two little mysteries which had slightly baffled him.

"But you are not in love with her—she holds no charm for you now?"

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This time he laughed aloud, but he bowed again, and looked at her very hard and curiously.

"Your powers of discernment do you infinite credit, Pat."

"That means that I am right. I want to separate her life from yours—in plain words, I want you to let her go."

"I wish you'd sit down, Pat. I must stand while you do, and, upon my word, I'm limp with amazement."

"You need not be," returned Pat, sitting on the edge of the window sill, while Brabazon threw himself down with a grateful murmur into the nearest and most comfortable chair. "What you have said amounts to telling me that I am right. Why don't you answer me frankly?"

"I will; but first—what if she should not be willing to be 'let go'? What if life has dealt hardly with her and her health? If she is alone and utterly without means of any sort?"

"She won't be when once I have seen her, when she is under my care."

"You are posing in a new role, Pat—dressing the Good Samaritan for a new part . . ."

"You said you would answer me frankly—go on."

Brabazon sat up to dive into his coat pocket for a cigarette case.

"May I smoke?" he asked. "Will you?"

"No; you may."

"Do let me order you some tea."

Pat's temper was rising, but she held it under with iron will. She would gain nothing with this man by anger; and already tears of vexation, tears born of fear that she would be baffled, were standing in her eyes. He did not notice them. If he had, he

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would have decided that women always cried when they did not get their own way at once.

"I want only your answer," she persisted.

"You are a very wilful little woman, Pat; and if I tell you some things that you don't like to hear, don't blame me. One's wife is hardly the person with whom . . ."

"Your wife you may safely regard as the greatest of strangers."

Brabazon's answer was to smile, and to settle himself more comfortably in his chair.

"Very well," he said. "You say you have met her and heard her story."

"Only part of it."

"That part which paints me blackest. You know that she attempted escape from her mode of life at the moment, and—from me. Escape is the word you used—perhaps she taught it you—why, I cannot imagine. I take it that not long after that 'escape' was effected, she met with a man who would have married her, but that she was absurdly and quite unnecessarily truthful concerning—the past. That sort of thing may be very admirable and honourable, but it does not pay—a woman. Mind you, I do not know this, she, no one has ever actually told me, but certain things happened which led me to putting two and two together, and making fifty like any feminine arithmetician. Added to that, one day, about six months ago now, a man you and I both know, met me unexpectedly. He behaved deucedly badly—in the meanest and worst taste, by worming his way into my rooms—these—and attacking me on the same subject as you have attacked me to-day——"

"Valerie Drummond?" Pat broke in breathlessly.

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"Valerie Drummond. The upshot of it was that he took me at a disadvantage, got the better of me——"

"You mean he thrashed you," said Pat uncompromisingly, and with so much real interest that at another moment Brabazon would have laughed.

"If you like to put it in those words—yes."

"His name?"

"Kerr Wingate."

"Ah!" It was only one sharply whispered word, but as it left Pat's parted lips, it seemed to find a strange echo at the opposite side of the room, an echo that startled them both into looking up.

"You see," Brabazon went on, "he gave me no chance—he did not let me take my revenge at the moment, he sneaked away like a coward when I was powerless to prevent him. But he had opened my eyes concerning the lady, and I knew when I found her that I'd make a harder blow go home to his heart, if he cared for her, than he'd ever made go home to my flesh.

"I did find her—not without a lot of trouble; I found her in failing health, in the worst sort of poverty, dragging out an existence in company with some young workers she had known in her father's time. She stuck to her guns for a bit, I admit; she lived in her squalid den, and sat half naked in draughts and bitterly cold studios to Valdor and any other man who'd pay her a few shillings a week as model; she ruined her health and nearly her beauty, because for some extraordinary reason she'd determined to tread the path of strictest virtue—for the sake of a man who after all had behaved a good deal worse to her than I had. He cast her off—I did not; but, with the inconsistency of woman, she desired to *escape* me!

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"Well, as I tell you, I found her, and I tried all I knew to induce her to leave her miserable life for a better one of my making—not, as you shrewdly guess, because I was in love with her any more, not because I was sorry for her, not because she eluded me for a time—you were wrong there, Pat,—but because I was determined to hit home my blow at the man through her. She was adamant for a while—poof! it was weary work. And then I discovered a weak spot—the only way to touch her heart. It was through her 'boys,' as she called them—those men who had been good to her when she was alone and deserted. I let her see how well I could help them, how I could set one upon the actual road to fortune, but that I was not going to move till she had agreed to my propositions. She weakened, but she did not give in. And then I played the trump card, one day. It does not sound much as I tell you now, but the whole situation lent itself to it. I invented a little story of Wingate's marriage—said I'd been to his wedding. I was not to know that she had ever even heard of him, so my shot went well home. That was about the finish of the struggle. Gad! all her strength gave out then—anyone could have led her with a hair. She bought success for her boys—she went down that they might rise; and do you know what they did," leaning forward, and looking right into his wife's tear-dimmed eyes, "when they found she'd been deceiving them, as they called it, when she went from them never saying how her only thought had been for them, they practically turned their backs upon her. Her surrender is not particularly flattering to myself, as you see, but all I had played for was a certain power over her—if she were a hag of ninety she could not be much less to me. The man had left England. I

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have but waited for his return, to flaunt her in his face—to let him know that once more she belongs to me—and presently to cast her off, to let her sink to what she may, for him to pick up out of the mire or leave in it. You want to save her? You're a trifle too late, Pat—wait till my work is over, then your opportunity will come."

He got up as he spoke, and gave his shoulders a great shake. All the indolence had died out of his face, out of his tired eyes. There was the savageness of a beast in them, and in the cruel expression of his mouth, and Pat slid from her seat on the window-sill, and stood for a moment holding the curtain, while she fought with a feeling of positive sickness.

"Cuthbert, don't do it. Give up so hideous, so low a revenge. Look, I have not the claim of common friendship to ask you this, but I do ask it. I beg it of you," she implored, weakly, because she felt it was hopelessly. "God knows that your life has been so evil that you will need mercy one day. Do what I ask you. Let this one thing count to your good. Let her go. Do not injure her further. Such intentions as you avow towards her are worse than brutal. Let me go to her. The man," looking on the ground, "may never return."

Brabazon looked on the ground too, and an odd smile crept round the corners of his lips.

"No, Wingate may never return. When he does, he will have something to learn."

"You won't hear me?" Pat said, drawing her breath hard.

"I am sorry. You do me much honour; but, ask me nearly anything else. You need not have heard that story, but you insisted. And I told it to you so that you should not trouble to try to move me.

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There is this left to you. You can find her, though it won't be easy, and you can put her on her guard. You can tell the story far and wide, only it won't be very nice telling for you—my wife."

"You make me ill," Pat said breathlessly. "You make me ashamed of having set foot in this loathsome place that you live in."

Then, without another word or glance, she groped her way to the door, which Brabazon held open, and to the main door, which he also held open.

That closed, he turned with great haste into another room on his left. A quick exclamation escaped him.

"Val!"

Valerie was standing by the window. She was only very white, otherwise she was her usual self.

"My dearest, how long have you been here?"

"Three minutes by the clock," returned Valerie, with a little smile. "Lessing said you were engaged. I was a little late, but your note asking me to come up was late too."

"I know. Pardon me a moment."

He went quickly out of the room, shutting the door behind him.

Lessing was just taking in some letters. His master dragged him into the room which Pat had vacated.

"How long has that lady been there?" he demanded in a whisper, with his eyes on the curtains that hid dividing doors. Lessing's knees, which had been knocking together for the last three-quarters of an hour, became suddenly strong.

"Two—perhaps three minutes, sir, when you went into the room," he returned, having had his ear to the door and ascertained what Valerie had said

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herself. "I had to say you were engaged, sir," with a deprecatory gesture.

"Oh, that's all right," Brabazon murmured, with a relieved sigh. "Only, if you took to making idiotic mistakes, you'd have to get out of this place."

He moved through the doorway. In the hall he paused thoughtfully.

"I shall want you to attend to that business I explained a little earlier than I thought."

"Very good, sir."

"Everything ready? You're certain there can't be a hitch?"

"Not of my causing, sir," with pathetically uplifted eyebrows.

"Good. Now, bring tea—and admit no one."

"Yes, sir."

Lessing went into his own room. He shut the door, and he wiped away the great beads of perspiration that stood out on his forehead.

"Lord! if he knew that she come in pretty well just behind his wife, he'd flay me! But he wouldn't have thanked me to have showed her in bang atop of the other! And she may have heard every word they said—which it wouldn't be Mrs B. that'd spare him! But if she did, she's keepin' it to herself, and lying low over it. She told him she'd been in the room three minutes by the clock—thank God I listened! And I suppose she did not bargain for his asking me! Whew!"

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XXVI

DARKNESS fell early on this particular evening. The clouds that had been heavy all day grew still heavier with approaching night; and still the rain poured in torrents, washing the streets, dulling the hum of traffic, driving all those who could be driven home, or under cover.

Wingate, after his interview with Pat, had gone straight to his own rooms; some vague half hope seemed to keep him there, something in Pat's manner that had given him that hope, something that had held a promise, and that kept him waiting, watching the clock, for a possible message from her.

His head ached with thinking. He had even tired his limbs with his constant tramp through the rooms. And now, as he turned away from the window and looked at his watch again, he gave his shoulders an impatient shake.

It was sheer folly to expect to hear yet—and when he did, it would be perhaps to hear no good news. But Pat had bidden him hold himself in readiness for her message—Pat, who had counted on better success than her plans had met with—and he was here waiting.

Ten minutes later the hall bell rang; and Wingate caught himself holding his breath till his own door opened.

"A boy messenger to see you, sir."

"Bring him in here."

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The boy came—not the most intelligent looking type.

"Are you Mr Wingate, sir?"

"Yes."

"The lady that sent me said I wasn't to give the message to no one but you, sir. Will you please go to this address at once," producing the back of one of his printed tickets, on which was written something in pencil, evidently scribbled by himself to refresh his memory. "She'll be there waitin' for you; and will you please ask for Mrs Brabazon—I was to be sure and say only Mrs Brabazon."

Wingate held the paper to the light; it bore Brabazon's address in Knightsbridge.

"Are you sure this is the right address," he questioned, a little puzzled.

"Yes, sir. The lady was there herself when she sent me."

"Were you to take an answer?"

"No, sir. You was to go at once, sir."

"All right. Here you are," tossing him half-a-crown. "As you go out, send me up a cab."

"Yes, sir; thank you, sir."

"Pat there? Pat in her husband's rooms?" Wingate said over and over again to himself perplexedly. "I wonder what can have happened—something unforeseen." The thought of Brabazon made his blood boil; the knowledge that Pat evidently wanted him at once hurried his steps. He put on his hat and a light mackintosh coat, and turning the collar high, stepped into the cab that he found waiting for him. Then still puzzling, still feeling anger uppermost at the mere memory of the man to whose rooms he was being swiftly borne, he lay back in the corner, looking with unseeing eyes

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upon the roads and pavements that shone like glass with the myriad lights twinkling over them.

Arrived at his destination, he sprang out of the cab, passed rapidly between the doors held back for him, and, declining the lift, ran up the stairs.

Lessing admitted him—a man who knew Wingate far better than he was known to him.

“Mrs Brabazon?” Wingate inquired, putting his hat down on the hall seat.

“Yes, sir.”

Lessing threw open a door at the far end of the long hall, and the visitor passed into a room that was in total darkness. When the lights, which were turned on from outside, shone full in his face, he was a little dazzled, but as his eyes grew used to them he saw, with considerable surprise, that he was in a bedroom—a large, luxurious bedroom, where the blinds were drawn, where the furnishings were light and tasteful, and spoke of a woman’s touch.

Before the door there was a huge screen, in the fireplace flowers, and drawn close to the end of the bed a large sofa on which a woman lay. A woman wrapped lightly in a long gown of white gauzy material made heavy with lace—a woman whose mass of flame-coloured hair spread over the pillows in rough disorder, whose hands hung down limply, and whose little bare feet were encased in soft blue velvet slippers.

With a hoarse cry Wingate took one step to the side of the sofa and bent down over the woman, the single word “Val” leaving his lips in a gasp of mingled horror and joy, and sudden, terrible, clear comprehension. For a moment the room spun round him, the walls seemed to be falling in on him. Through a mist, through the blackness as of night,

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through sickening delirium that momentarily closed on sight and sense, he felt her soft breath on his cheek. As one coming slowly out of a dream, he saw her lying there in the abandonment of sleep. His hand closed on and buried itself in the masses of her hair, his lips breathed her name again,—and then he remembered that he was beneath Brabazon's roof, that he had asked for Mrs Brabazon, and he had been conducted here.

With a sudden revulsion of feeling he stood upright, his hand flung off the strands of hair wound round it.

She stirred, as though his intent glance, the sound of his voice, woke her from deepest sleep; her eyes opened slowly, then widely and more widely; a little cry left her lips, and then, as the man took a step backwards, she struggled to a sitting posture. Madness took possession of Wingate, a very demon of rage, in which was strangely blended a sense of deadliest insult, and keenest, cruellest disappointment, a dashing down of some vague, perhaps groundless hope that had come to him with the promise held in Pat's sweet eyes: but still a hope, a possibility of something worth the name of life in the future.

All had been snatched from him in this moment—not by degrees, but in one blinding blow that left him powerless to reason; only conscious that he had been cheated, made sport of, insulted, trapped into coming to this place that he might look upon the wreck of his lost love—lost by his own folly—that he might find her beneath the very roof of the man who had ruined her life and his.

If she had touched him he must have flung her from him; but she only strove to reach him like a woman dragging herself out of a hideous dream; she

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only stretched her hands to him like a drowning creature seeking to clutch at any straw that might mean safety.

"You—you!" she breathed faintly, while he went farther out of her reach, and never saw that, as he flung himself through the door-way, she fell face down across the edge of the sofa.

Lessing heard the hall door close, close with a bang that shook the ceilings. He had sufficient presence of mind to keep out of the way.

And the crash roused Valerie.

She stood up uncertainly, holding to the end of the bed for support. There was a curious heaviness about her head and eyes, and just at first memory would not come. She threw back the loose hair from her face and looked round the room. When last she could remember anything, she was pouring out tea for herself and Brabazon; now she was clothed in a filmy garment strange to her, her hair was loose, her feet were bare; and thrown over a chair were her clothes. Her mouth was dry and hot. She looked at the clock and saw that it was nearing night.

And while, with her head resting on her hand, her eyes were fastened on the floor, tracing the pattern of the carpet in search of some answer to her thoughts, they fell upon a dark object close to the sofa's head.

Stooping to pick it up, she saw that it was a pocket book; opening it, she saw first Wingate's name and the address of his rooms—an address that burned itself into her brain. Then all at once her mind became clear—she seemed to understand. She went across the room with the stealthy step of a cat, and slipped the pocket-book among the folds of her gown hanging over the chair back. That

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done, she crept back to the sofa, stretching her limbs along it, and letting her head fall back on the pillows and her hair over them.

Her eyes closed. Her mind went back several hours. She was reading a letter from Brabazon, which bade her come to him here; she was making the journey, she was entering these rooms, she was marking Lessing's evident agitation as she passed him, without invitation, into the nearest room, and heard his information that his master was engaged for a few minutes. She was again standing by the window, with that weary indifference to all that happened upon her, which was part of her life now, and her ears were suddenly caught by the sound of a remembered voice. She was listening, she was creeping towards the heavy curtains and drawing them gently aside while she leant her ear to the dividing doors. She was listening—she was hearing again every word of Brabazon's conversation with his wife. And even as she lay here, her blood tingled, her breath came short, as it had done that afternoon. She was listening to Brabazon's story, told with such coarse brutality, and broken upon every now and again by Pat's sweet, pleading voice—she was listening to her pass through the hall, and then to Brabazon's anxious inquiry as to how long she, Valerie, had been in the house. She was telling him but a few minutes, and even then she was lying instinctively, that she might gain time for thought. She remembered then that Brabazon had taken away her tea and told her that she looked ill, and had ordered Lessing to bring her some wine. From that moment she remembered no more.

She could have sprung to her feet without an effort now, but she forced herself to keep still. She

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understood his plot—all his plans. She realised, with bitter hopelessness, that they had been all too successful.

And still she lay there, a thought coming to her that gradually took shape, that took firm hold of her, a determination that no power on earth could have set aside. One moment her cheeks tingled and her eyes shone like fire, another and she was white as death, the beads of cold perspiration standing out on her face and on her throat.

And while her hands clenched and her teeth set, she heard a distant door close softly, Brabazon's voice lowered as he spoke to Lessing. And she stretched her limbs at greater ease, and closed her eyes, and let her hands fall limply to her sides once more.

Brabazon, bending over her, only saw that she still seemed to sleep very heavily.

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XXVII

SHE heard him moving softly about the room; she saw through her eyelashes, that she lifted scarcely the twentieth part of an inch, that once he stood before the mirror studying his face with evident satisfaction, and brushing his hair down smoothly on each side. Presently she heard him speaking to Lessing, telling him that it would be hours before madam awoke, and that she was not to be disturbed. After that, silence reigned throughout the rooms. The lights were switched off again from outside—darkness and silence fell, silence save for the distant rumble of traffic, for the steady wash of the rain.

Whether Brabazon remained in his rooms or went out she did not know; she heard and saw no signs of life.

Whatever the drug administered to her, it had not done its work fully; still, it left her dazed, more than ordinarily weak, sensible of all that might be going on about her, yet powerless to stir. Yet memory had come; she had the full power to reason; and lying there she made the most of it.

The hours crept by; one after another she heard them chimed out in different tones and times by several different clocks.

She lay there as one awaiting death might lie through the night, while the watchers dozed off into

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fitful sleep, and before the fading eyes all life from its earliest recollections spread out, a picture from which she turned with a shudder. She lay there in the pain of memory, of useless regret, of the knowledge of all her life might have held, and of all she had missed. She lay there with no sound coming to her but the regular ticking of the clocks, the sough of the wind, the beating down of the rain on the window panes, the roar of the traffic beyond. And while her eyes unclosed, looking upward into the darkness, it seemed as though life were indeed fading from her, that death was close at hand. Of death she had no dread; she would have welcomed it,—but of death alone, in solitude. A mortal sense of terrible loneliness, a certain fear, stole on her, leaving her paralysed, strengthless.

The night wore on. If she dreamed, she did not know; she only understood presently that new strength had come to her, that her way, all at once, had become plain, sure.

She rose from her couch, she groped about the room in search of means to give her light; she found the bell, and would have sounded it, but that at that moment she heard Brabazon's voice—it was loud, blustering, as when he had been drinking heavily—raised in some order to Lessing, who, evidently, was not at hand.

Valerie had found her way to the door, and there, just outside it, she stood facing Brabazon, a ghostly figure that startled him into the utterance of a half savage, half frightened oath.

"Good Lord!" he exclaimed thickly, dropping his dripping hat and coat upon the floor of the hall. "What the devil—oh, to be sure—hanged if I hadn't forgotten you, Val. Better now?"

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He passed his hand restlessly over his eyes, and made an effort to pull himself together; and she stood leaning against the woodwork, her hands clenched in the folds of her gown, her eyes narrowed, not with the heaviness of sleep, but with calm calculation, and her body a little bent, as a cat bends when it is about to spring. She moved nearer to him.

"I'm all right," she said quietly, not asking a question, not showing any surprise or bewilderment at finding herself here in this position. "Why," putting her hand on his arm, "you are awfully wet."

"Beast of a night—coming down in bucketfuls. Good Lord! it's nearly two o'clock. I swear I forgot you, Val! Only just got up? You are cold and hungry. Come in here," pushing open the dining-room door, "and have a glass of the Boy, anyhow. Dashed if I didn't think you were a ghost standing there."

It was plain that his mind was not very clear, and that he was making an effort to clear it. She followed him into the room, drawing her flimsy gown tightly round her, and never once taking her eyes off him. Supper was daintily spread, as it was always spread, for four people, after twelve o'clock. Every delicacy that could be left cold lay under snowy white cloths; on the sideboard were wines, and spirits, and mineral waters, and great bowls of ice, fast melting away. An intense thirst parched her throat; when Brabazon's back was turned to her she drank swiftly, quietly, from one of the ice-pails, holding its frosted sides with trembling hands, and replacing it softly on the linen cloth.

She sat down at one side of the table, and watched

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him while he let the cork fly from a bottle, pushing her glass towards him, which he filled, but which she did not touch again. While he still stood he also filled his own glass twice, and drained it to the last drop.

"That's better," he declared, throwing himself back in the chair at the head of the table, and looking at her with tired, rather pink-rimmed eyes. "What a liar I am! I told someone to-day—who the deuce was it—that you'd lost your beauty! Lost your beauty! You ought to see yourself now, Val, with that white thing on, and all the red hair flying about. Gad! That's how you ought to have sat to Valdor and those other chaps. How'd you like to? What if you had to, eh?"

"I don't understand you."

He had put the little breast of a bird upon her plate, and she was moving it about idly with her fork, but not attempting to eat it. Now, as he leant one elbow unsteadily on the table and brought his hot face closer to hers, the fingers of her right hand slid softly between the china and glass, and drew towards her the long, heavy knife set at one side of his plate. He did not see the movement, he saw only her great burning eyes, a little indistinctly.

"No, but you will! You've never asked me yet why I sent for you to-day . . . was it to-day?" he said. "Hang it! my head's like a furnace!"

"Why did you?" she asked, very quietly; but her eyes suddenly met his, so that he saw them for an instant clearly, and there was something in their expression that seemed to startle the man a little. He drew his arm off the table, and before he answered, re-filled and emptied his glass again.

"I'd got a plan! Gad! how easily it worked

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after all. What'd you say, Val, if I told you you took a few drops in the wine Lessing brought you to-day that sent you into that pleasant sleep? What'd you say if . . ."

"I'll tell you," she replied, still with intense calm that somehow troubled him vaguely. "You need not trouble to explain. I knew your plan five minutes after I entered these rooms. I heard all you and your wife said."

"You heard! You and Lessing lied to me, then?"

"Yes."

"I half suspected it; no, I didn't, though. I feared it in the beginning when I found you here, but I believed—him—damn him! . . . not that it matters much."

"Not at all!"

He looked at her sharply. Her quiet words had sobered him a little, but sobering had the effect of robbing him of his good temper.

"Well, you know, then?" looking at her with narrowed eyes.

"I'll tell you what you don't know. While you slept in yonder room, while I took care you *should* sleep, I brought your one-time lover to see you. I trapped him easily enough. I brought him here, to see *you* here! I was curious to know what he'd do—he left you as he left you before. Do you know that in this very room he thrashed me like he'd thrash a hound? Do you know I swore to make him pay for it—and through you? You see I can wait—you see I don't mind time and trouble."

He leant forward again and laughed; he watched the whitening of her face, her lips, to the whiteness of death; he saw the dark shadows under her eyes growing darker; and, his voice sinking to a hoarse

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whisper, he laid before her all his intentions towards her, more clearly, more brutally, than he had laid them before Pat.

And she never once spoke. Only her breath came more heavily; her eyes never left his, her fingers clasped and unclasped over the strong, slender blade of the knife still beneath them. She let him speak on, uninterrupted, well knowing that he was hardly conscious of what he was saying; she watched him fill and drain his glass repeatedly; she saw his eyes grow dim, and that he swayed to catch sight of her face as though it eluded him. And she did not move when he bent nearer, till his breath was on her cheek, his hot mouth almost against her ear.

But it was when he had finished speaking, when, with half closed eyes, and a low, insulting laugh, he threw himself against the back of his chair, and regarded her with half amusement, that Valerie stirred.

With a low, choking cry, with a spring lithe and swift and sure as a panther's, she threw herself forward, with all the strength of wild, ungovernable passion, straight across his breast. The sudden, unexpected attack gave him no time for resistance, the weight of her body hurled across his snapped the back of the chair, and sent them both to the ground. A savage oath left his lips, his arm went out to thrust her off him; the next moment the words he sought to utter died away in a short, sharp, gasping sound. Valerie knelt above him, watching the blood flow swiftly out over his throat, a dark stain growing larger on the whiteness of his collar; stooping only once, with a low laugh, hideous in its harshness, to drive still farther home,

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in its bed beneath his ear, the knife that her fingers had never ceased to fondle.

She rose to her feet and stood looking down upon him, laughing quietly while the fluttering breath died away, while the lips grew blue and rigid, while the face grew set and still and stern in death.

Then she moved. She took from the table a glass and dashed it straight into the wide-open, staring eyes that looked up into hers without sight and without life.

The clock struck the half-hour past two. The sound—the only one stirring the dead silence—roused her, struck home to her heart a frightful fear.

Moving cautiously, yet swiftly, she passed into the hall, switching off the lights as she went. That which burned in the hall itself was shaded and dim, but by it she saw that she was quite alone. But while she listened, to her wild fancy, 'through the booming in her ears, there seemed to come the sound of a soft movement from the direction of the servants' quarters. In front of her there hung a cloak—a woman's, long and dark. Without pausing to think, she lifted it from its hook, flung it round her shoulders, and drew the cape of it over her head. Not hesitating, not giving one backward glance, she drew back the latch of the door, and passed into the silence of the outer hall. She sped down the stairs light and swift as a bird; the glass doors were unbarred; the night porter sat fast asleep in the lift. In the courtyard one lamp burned, its light made uncertain by the high wind and the steady downpour of rain. Beyond, the traffic seemed to have ceased; the streets streaming with water, deserted. The rain came down in torrents that made every object seen as through a veil; here and there Valerie caught the glint of a policeman's

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helmet, the black, wet brightness of his cape as he stood far back in a doorway for a moment's shelter. But no living creature passed her as she sped on, her white gown held close under the dark cloak, her bare feet in their soft, soaked velvet covering, making no sound. The wind increased in violence, the rain swept in great sheets full in her face, but Valerie paused not even for breath ; she sped on through the night, not with the wildness of fear going on and on, anywhere, at random, but to a haven of rest and safety.

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XXVIII

KERR WINGATE sat by his writing table, his arms thrown down upon it, his head resting on them. He had come back from Brabazon's rooms to his own, almost unconscious that he did so; he had dismissed his servants with impatience, and had shut himself up alone. Nothing was clear to him but Valerie's face, her slender, white-gowned form as he had seen it stretched out in the easy abandonment of sleep.

Nothing had been clear since—thought stood still, memory would go no farther. The night passed without his knowledge.

While he rested in the same position, his dog came near to him and put a paw upon his knee. It strengthened one paw with the other, but met with no response. In patience it waited a moment, and then gave vent to a little whine.

Wingate, roused, turned to look at it impatiently, and to order it to lie down; but the dog flew to the door wagging its tail violently, and uttering little short barks. Wingate, listening, heard a sound without, not the knocker or the bell touched, but the soft hammer of knuckles on the glass panels. He listened again; the sound was repeated. Someone trying to tamper with the lock, he told himself, and strode into the hall and flung the door wide.

There in the aperture, with the water streaming from her clothes and her hair, with her drenched face

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set and white, and her eyes wide and pleading, Valerie stood.

To have saved his life Wingate could have uttered no sound; and while he stood staring at her, not believing his own eyes, trying to fight his way out of some dream, she crept in, closing the door herself behind her, and then clinging desperately to his arm.

Her touch awoke him, the pressure of her chill, wet fingers. He looked down at her silently for one moment more, and then he lifted her into his arms and carried her, with the water streaming from every rag, into the room.

"You! *You!*" he said, scarcely setting her on her feet, and searching her great eyes. "Speak to me—let me hear your voice—if I am dreaming . . ."

She brought her cold hand up timidly to his face, she drew closer to him, while his arms instinctively strengthened their hold. "It is I—Val! Don't—don't turn from me—don't drive me away! You didn't understand—you—O God! you wouldn't wait to hear—and—and I have come to tell you. You loved me once! By that love I plead with you to hear me now. Don't drive me away," clinging more closely to him, "don't turn me out into the street again."

"Hush! For heaven's sake—though I deserve you should think me brute enough for that."

He silenced her as she would have spoken again, and, releasing her from his hold, took from her shoulders the drenched cloak. And as he threw it aside, he fell back with a startled cry. Beneath it there was only the white gown in which he had seen her lying asleep that evening in Brabazon's rooms; her feet were still bare, save for the little slippers that clung to them like wet paper now.

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"You came through the streets in that! You followed me——"

"Not at once—I have only come straight here. No one saw me—there is not a soul about, and the storm is raging. Kerr," catching at his arm again, "Don't let anyone—*anyone* come in here—don't let anyone see me. Give me a little while to—to tell you all—don't leave me."

"Be quiet a moment," he said gently. "I'm half bewildered still, I think. Nothing has been clear but you since I saw you in that accursed place. I was mad then, mad as I was before to leave you. What is it that has each time driven me to madness, to acting like a brute, and a fool, and a coward, at the moment when—when——"

"I needed you most! No, don't blame yourself. The time's short—so short," with a little wail, and looking nervously over her shoulder. "Don't let us waste it. Oh, take my hands in yours and forget—and help me to forget. Hold them—hold them," stretching them out, cold and damp still, to him; "and vile though you know me to be, say your heart is not quite dead to me."

"Dead to you! *Dead to you!* Val, do you understand love so little that you think such as mine was—nay, is—for you, can ever die?"

He took her hands; the coldness of them sent a chill to his heart. He put her back into a chair.

"You'll have caught your death of cold," he declared half roughly, because he was afraid. "Wait, no one shall come near you here. You are safe, and you are with me—remember that; but I won't hear a word till you are dry and warm."

He pushed aside some ferns in the fireplace impatiently. The fire was laid in the grate behind,

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and, at a touch of his match, leapt to flame. This done, he went into another room and fetched a rough towel with which he dried her feet, kneeling down on the rug and holding the chilled soles up to the warmth. He touched the white gauzy gown, but she shook her head and told him it was dry; and then he went out of the room again, and came back some moments later with something steaming hot in a glass.

"It is only brandy and hot water," he said, "it may save you from a fatal chill—heaven knows! Drink it all."

Valerie obeyed. When he took the glass from her a little colour had crept into her cheeks, her fingers were warm.

He stood at the other side of the fireplace while the coals got hot, and the flames danced merrily up the chimney. Suddenly his eyes met hers. The next moment he had thrown himself down on his knees at her feet.

"Forget—forget," she whispered to him, framing his face in her hands, and then drawing it close to her breast till her heart beat under his cheek.

"But to-day, I found you," he began, lifting his eyes to hers, the old mad ungovernable jealousy in them and in every tone of his voice.

"I know," she answered him. "If you had waited you would have understood—I should have found strength to tell you, and you would have believed; I gave you truth always."

"God knows you did," he said heavily; "how often have I wished with all my soul that you had lied to me."

She drew her breath hard; she passed over the slight injustice of the words, because she understood

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his pain, and she knew how much more there was for him to bear.

"Listen to me; let me tell you now while I have strength and time."

"And time!"

She nodded.

"It is so short—the time. Don't leave me—hold me close while I tell you."

He did not wonder at the strangeness of her words or the wildness of her eyes, and he drew himself up to the arm of her chair, and held her close to him with less of passion than of tender pity, that soothed her, but that left her hungering for the tenderness, for one sign of the love that had been all hers.

"Have you lied to *me*," she demanded restlessly. "Did you say your heart is not dead to me only out of pity? Don't you care?"

He forced her back a little from him, because she had lifted herself so that her lips almost touched his, and at this moment to forget seemed almost easy.

"You know it! I must—no power can rob me of my love for you. But—you belonged to—him! You went back to him. While I fought for strength to forget you, you were with him once more. When at last, knowing that life was worthless without you, I came back for your forgiveness, for your love—for you, you—only you—I find you with him, you bring me yourself beneath his roof that I may see with my own eyes . . ."

"Not I! He brought you. In heart I have never wronged you or the memory of your love. Every thought I have kept true and pure for you. For my acts he and the devil may answer, since God and you deserted me. In heart and thought I tell you I have been true to you—whose wife I might have been!

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Do you think I ever forgot that? Don't you understand that all I have had to live upon has been the memory of that moment when you loved me and you—did not know. Forget all else, believe, and take me back into your heart for this one hour."

He made her no answer, he drew her beauty back to the shelter of his arms, with a long sigh he laid his lips to hers. The long moments passed unheeded—they had both forgotten. At last she stirred in his hold, and leant her head back again on his heart.

"Now hear me," she said.

Through the silence of the room, in the safe shelter of his arms, she told her story, hiding and omitting nothing. She took him back to the hour of their parting, and, with her, through every hour of her life since, till that hour to-night when he had found her in Brabazon's rooms. And he did not interrupt her once. He heard her straight through. Only a low murmur, sharp and savage, escaped him now and again; only once when she spoke of one part of her life, he put her out of his arms and got up and walked about the room, as though he could not rest while he heard. Only she saw his hands clench, and all the life and the colour die out of his face.

"My God!" he said, when her voice, weak and tired, died away; "that six months should have held such life for you while I—I—in my madness—Val," suddenly, "you got out of that place, you came to me, thank God! Everything is clear to me, and I know how to act. Tell me, is he there now—where is he? He has escaped so often for Pat's sake, he shall not escape again. Hard though it may be for her . . ."

She stirred, and put his arms voluntarily from her now. He saw some light glow in her eyes that

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frightened him, he watched a smile play round her pale lips that was a terrible revelation to him. She stood well back from him, and, for the first time, let the full folds of her white robe—some of which she had kept persistently crushed behind her—fall in their natural lines to the ground. Then, following Wingate's suddenly horrified eyes, she looked down, it seemed to him, with ferocious satisfaction, upon a dark spot of blood that stained her gown just below her knees.

"He has escaped," she said, "everyone but me. Don't you understand?" looking up at him and laughing gladly. "I killed him to-night, after, oh, long after you had gone. I knew I should do it. When you rushed out of the place and the door banged, I woke fully. I lay there for hours—till nearly two in the morning. Then he came back. He was not sober; he told me much of what I had already learned, and more that I did not know. He mapped out my future life for me in terms that I will not tell you. I killed him!" again with that joyous uplifting of her eyes to his. "I drove the knife right home to his throat more than once, and I waited to see that he was dead. Do you think a woman couldn't do it? I did. I flung my weight on him, and he was not sober enough to have strength against me. I left him dead—dead! with his brutal insulting taunts warm on his lips cut short in his lying throat—and I came to you."

"Val!"

Her name was choked in a whisper. Involuntarily he got up and locked the door; instinctively he gathered up her gown where the blood stain was, and wrenched the piece away, and flung it into the heart of the fire.

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"You must come away," he said hurriedly. "We must not lose an instant. Already it—they—discovery may have been made. Good God! How can I get you from here at this hour in those clothes, without drawing attention to you? My darling, help me—think for me!"

She crept into his arms that he suddenly threw out, and turned her face with a little tired sigh to his breast.

"I couldn't travel a yard to save myself," she murmured, smiling up at him. "Don't try to take me away—they—they—will never find me——"

"This is sheer madness—you don't know what you say. Val, for my sake——"

"I killed him for your sake," she said dreamily, all the strength and life seeming to leave her limbs and voice in one moment. "Let us forget—the time is so short. Put me down over there, and sit beside me."

"Val, listen. You are weak, ill, I know; but if you will only trust to me, and do as I bid you, I can get you away from here. At this hour, in this storm, there are few about. I know where I can get a motor . . . Have you the courage to stay here while I go—there is no one but my servant in the place—I'll lock the doors, and . . ."

"Not now—don't leave me—I could not stay alone—I should go mad!" with sudden wild fear. "If—if—they find me, what would they do?"

Wingate looked about him helplessly; he answered her with a suppressed groan.

"What would they do. Take me away? Well, I should have had this hour with you. It is worth it. This hour together—it is our own—let us forget all else. You love me—in spite of all—though

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my hands are stained with his blood, you love me?"

"My life! You know it. But," desperately, "you are driving me mad with fear—you don't understand. If you care for me you will be guided by me—you will do as I bid you."

"No, it is for you to do as I bid you! This hour, this night is ours—*ours!* Don't *you* understand. Keep me with you."

"My heart—if you don't let me take you from here I shall have no power to keep you with me."

"For a little while—a little while. Look, I have been ill for months; they talked of a delicate chest, and forgot to look for the broken heart. The strength I had to-night was false—it is spent. Give me peace and the shelter of your arms for to-night—let me sleep on your heart—I am so tired, so tired . . ."

Her eyes closed, her head fell back; some new fear, a fear for something more than her present danger, took possession of him. He bent over her in her odd, heavy sleep, and the wild passion of his kisses roused her for a moment.

"Forget!" she murmured, while her arms fell limply from about his throat.

The storm had worn itself out, the dawn broke eastward. The world was no longer still about them, it was waking to life, and the rest, that had been everywhere save in Wingate's heart, was banished indeed now. He looked out at the rosy warning of another day, and held his hand before his eyes as though the red light blinded him. His ears were strained for sounds immediately below in the street, or at his own door. He had carried Valerie to his

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own room and had put her on his bed; he had watched by her while she slept a little, and woke often to smile into his eyes, and he had been tortured with the certainty that she needed a doctor's advice, and the knowledge that he dared not bring anyone from the outside world to her.

His servant began to move about; the woman who assisted in the housework arrived, and the unfamiliar sounds of brooms and pails forced themselves irritatingly upon Wingate's ears. It seemed to him that the hours dragged and yet flew by.

He kept the door of his room shut, and the servants, deciding that he would not wish to be disturbed, left even the taking in of his tea and letters till the very last moment.

As this duty was just about to be performed, the hall door bell pealed out a long summons.

Every drop of blood seemed to ebb slowly from Wingate's heart; instinctively, unconsciously, he came out of his room and stood with his back against the door just in time to hear his man saying—"Lor' bless me, Mr Wingate's not up!"

In spite of this information, the two men, who a moment ago had been on the other side of the door, stepped into the hall and closed it, one pointing to where Wingate, whom he knew well, stood.

"Good morning, sir. May I trouble you to spare me a few minutes."

Wingate left his post by the door, and conducted the man to the room next his own.

"Blake!" he said, with a faint tone of relief in his voice.

"Yes, sir," Inspector Blake returned, "I'm glad and sorry that it's me—if you can make that out. I see you know my business, sir. Mr Wingate, I needn't

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tell you that delay, resistance of any sort, will make matters worse. I'm sure you understand the position too well for there to be any need of me telling you."

"Why do you come to me?"

Blake made a deprecatory gesture.

"Acting chiefly on information given by Lessing, the murdered gentleman's servant—the fact that during the evening you were with Miss Valerie Drummond in Mr Brabazon's rooms, and——"

"Sh! Speak low!" and Wingate looked towards the dividing curtains.

"Mr Wingate—it's early, there's not many about. There's a carriage waiting down below—you and the lady . . ."

Wingate silenced him with a gesture.

"Wait," he said, and went out of the room into the next. From that side he drew back the curtains and pointed to Valerie lying still on the bed.

"Look, she is ill—she sleeps. Wait—wait—a little. By God!" as the man stepped quietly to the bedside, "if you wake her in fear . . ."

"Mr Wingate," he said, while his voice dropped to a hushed whisper, and he stood with low-bowed head, "no one will ever wake her again. She's dead, sir—and if she was aught to you, be thankful for it."

XXIX

SUMMER once more, and summer at Dale. Miss Angela and Miss Hermione Drummond seated at the breakfast table, the one folding her serviette with elaborate care, the other picking up *The Times* preparatory to carrying it off to the morning-room.

Her eyes catch a familiar name, and with a peremptory gesture she detains her sister.

"Listen to this, Angela," she says, adjusting her glasses and speaking with her lips drawn tightly, and the hollows at her temples deepening, as they always deepen in moments of extreme anger or agitation, "Listen to this—

"'On July 23rd, at St Mary's, Eaton Place, Grenvil Delmar, only son of the late Sir Grenvil Delmar, Bart, of Delmar Lodge, Mitching, and Lady Delmar, of 41A Portland Place, London, to Patricia, widow of the late Cuthbert Brabazon.'"

"Brabazon! That was the name of that horrible man whose—death that misguided girl Valerie was mixed up in. His widow has married Sir Grenvil Delmar of Delmar Lodge . . ."

"They will be our neighbours," adds Miss Hermione gaspingly; "they will possibly have the effrontery to call upon us or expect us to call upon them. Our name has been sufficiently disgraced already. Angela, we shall either have to leave Dale

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altogether, or keep the gates firmly closed in the faces of *all!*"

"We will keep the gates closed in the faces of all," decides Miss Angela, dropping *The Times* as though it were hot. "And our hearts from inclining us towards an endeavour to befriend anyone—in the future."

THE END



